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Virgle E. Nelson

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ORAL HISTORY

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Date 29 JULY, 1980

Virgle Nelson
(Signature - Interviewee)

Mayzel N/N/A
Address

Date 29 JULY, 1980

Norman D Munsey
(Signature - Witness)

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Text in regular bold print is questions/comments by interviewer, N.D. Munsey. Text in italics is answers/comments by interviewee, Virgle Nelson.

Mr. Nelson, would you state your full name, please, sir?

Virgle Nelson.

No middle initial?

E.

Virgle E. Nelson. (Mmm-hmm) You were born when and where, sir?

I was born in July the 25th, 1922. I was on the hill from what they called Hamricks Run at the time. Upon on Buffalo.

Hamricks Run?

Mmm-hmm.

And where did you go to school, sir?

I went to school at Adiar and I went to school at Gross Hill up on Dog Run.

Okay sir. After you. . .you told me earlier that you'd graduated from high school. After you graduated from high school. . .

No, I didn't graduate. (You didn't graduate?) I only got to fifth grade. (You went to the fifth grade?) Yeah.

What did you do after you got out of school?

I worked for Elk River Coal Lumber Company. I worked [inaudible] hauled cross ties off the [inaudible] track up there Avokie and Brush Bottom and I was about 12 years old at the time.

Good Lord! Did you work for them until you went in the service?

Until I went in the service. Then after I'd done that, I hauled coal to a steam shovel and after I done that, I worked on the railroad 'til I went in the service.

That's all for Elk River Coal?

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Elk River Lumber. Now, wait a minute. The Buffalo Creek and Gauley see on the lower end. The upper end was Elk River Coal and Lumber Company.

So you worked for both?

I worked for both. But I worked for Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad first. All this was before then.

Okay. And where did you live, at the time you were working, before you went in the service?

I lived with my parents where I was born. We owned a farm. I believe maybe about as well as I can remember, about 80 to 100 acres, something like that.

Where did you live at after you got back from the military service?

Well, uh, the day I went to service, my dad moved to a place that he lives now over here at the top of Dundon Hill. He bought that place. And I come back home there, of course, and lived with my parents awhile. I was wounded in service and I wasn't able to go to work for a long time. And uh, so uh, when I got so I thought I could stand work, my dad was foreman on the yard at Widen, section foreman.

What was your father's name, sir?

Herman Nelson. And he talked to Perkins, George Perkins, that was the tippie foreman at the time. And he told my dad to tell me to come on up. He gave me a job. And I went to Widen after I got back. That was '45, I believe. I can't be sure about dates 'cause sometimes you get to studying about it and it's another day there. But anyway, I went up there and he give me job picking slate on the tippie.

What did that. . . what did that job entail? What was it like?

Oh, well, it was work. And uh, it was just picking slate. You see, the coal run off the hill on a belt, and then they run it across these screens and they had a table that six men worked at. And they picked slate out of lump coal, and uh, as it come by. It was hand picked, the lump coal was, you see. The other coal, they run it through a washer.

Can you remember what kind of pay you got back then?

I was studying about that today, and I believe that we got \$4 for 8 hours, I think's what we got at that time.

That was picking slate?

Yeah. I believe we got \$4 for 8 hours, is what we got at that time.

What were you getting in 1952?

In '52 I got \$16. . . a little bit better than \$16 for 8 hours.

Was that net or gross? Was that take home or. . .?

No, of course, that was what I made, your income tax and your company expense and all that had to come out of that.

What, other than income tax, came out of it, that the company'd take out?

Well, the company took out hospitalization, I believe was around \$2. And uh, then they had a miscellaneous that they took out, that I believe was maybe fifty cents or a dollar, something like that. But it was just miscellaneous. I don't know what it went for. Then, of course, they had a so-called league up there. Wasn't nothing to it. It was just a so-called thing.

What do you mean, league?

League. That was an organization that they had for the men, they said, you know. But all the time I worked there, 7 year after I come back from the Army, and I never knowed of or went to a meeting during all that time.

Was it a union?

Well, it was a, it was constructed for that purpose, I think. But I, uh, I know that you never could find out anything about it. I couldn't. I know one time Lanny Facemore was the president of it, supposed to be. And he went to Gandy and asked him about having a league meeting and Gandy told him, "When a dog's asleep, just let it sleep." That's the words he told him.

Okay. Did you, you didn't work in the mine, did you, sir?

No, I worked outside on the tipple.

I won't ask you any questions on mine safety then, since you worked outside. They had pretty complete school system at Widen, didn't they?

Well, I never went to school up there. But as far as I know they did. Bradley built his own system of whatever was on his property was Bradley's, and he arranged it to suit hisself. If he

didn't like a teacher, he got rid of that teacher. If he wanted a school house, he built a school house. Now, as far as I know, I've heard, now this is just a rumor now. I don't know this to be a fact. Because I didn't have to no reason to finger in to that end of it. But they tell me that he had built a school house and get it off on his taxes. I don't know whether that happened or not for sure. That's just heresy.

Was there a police force in Widen?

None other than the constable, only during strikes.

How was. . .any kind of discipline or safety contained in a town of upwards of 5500?

Well, after Gandy come there, Gandy took care of that hisself by . . .men would go off and get drunk or something, say. I could name names that done this very thing, but I don't want to do that. And they'd come back to work and he'd hear about 'em being over at this beer joint at [inaudible] or over at Berts River drunk a fighting, Gandy'd lay 'em off 4 or 5 days or a week, some of them 2 weeks. Gandy would give 'em 2 or 3 days or a week off from work, see, for being over at Berts River or over at [inaudible name] fighting or whatever they'd got into.

What if they continued doing this?

Well, he'd continue laying 'em off. And he was a master man that growled, [inaudible] around the men about things.

What about social life in Widen? What was there to do there?

That I didn't fool with too much. Now, I lived in Widen awhile after I was first married. And I lived up in Brush Fence. They had 2 story houses and they'd rent you a half a house, you know. And uh, I lived in one of them awhile. And I lived by a Clark, Pino Clark. That's about all I knowed about him, because that's about all I wanted to know about him. And uh, him and his wife would get into fights and everything else, just didn't [inaudible] But anyway, that was their business. And I lived up there a little while. I don't know just how long. And I built me a house out on my dad's place and moved out there, before I bought this place here.

How much did he cost you to live in half a community and half a company house?

I just don't know what the rent was. But the rent wasn't very much.

Did they have churches in Widen? Or did you. . .

As far as I know they did. I believe they did, yeah. I never went to church in Widen, but I believe they did. I couldn't swear they did have, but I think they did, yeah.

Ball team?

Yeah, had a ball team. Yeah, knowed about that. Yeah.

YMCA?

Yeah. Well, now, the YMCA was there for a little while. But they. . . finally put-, the old store burnt down down there and they put the store up there in the Y.

Okay. I think. . . could you tell me some more about the Employees League of Widen Miners? How was it organized?

Well, you see, I wasn't there during the time they organized it.

Let's put it this way. How was it set up?

I don't think anybody ever knowed. Only thing I knowed about it was, and the only thing that was ever explained to me about it was they had a league there and they'd hold fifty cents dues off of you a month, and that's all I ever knowed about it. And uh, you see, you didn't check on stuff like that. If you did, you didn't work for Bradley very long, you didn't stay there.

How were the members selected to the governing committee?

I don't think anybody could tell you how it was done. It was just appointed by Gandy. It's just strictly my own theory. [inaudible] or whoever the lieutenant was at the time.

How were grievances handled?

Well, just like I told you awhile ago. By Gandy. Gandy was the main man.

Could you go to Facemyer, say I have a grievance?

No, you might go say that. But that's as far as it went.

It uh, when you were living and working, this was prior to 1952, living and working in Widen, did you notice any UMW organizing attempts?

No, no. Now, they's been, people have been mislead about that all the way. I am one of the fellars that went to the trouble to talk to Bill Blizzard to get support in that strike.

When did you do that?

That was during the first part of the strike. Now when the strike first come out, see, here's the thing about it. They was fathers and sons against one another. And [interruption] during that strike, you see, all the working men that was at Widen at the time I believe it was 615 men come out on this strike.

Where did you get that figure?

Of course, the bosses, we couldn't-, we had that figure on our, on our uh, list. And the bosses, of course, they couldn't come out on strike. They had-, they was company men, you know. But anyway, they was fathers and sons and so on. And finally, after when they come out on strike, I come home, I stayed at home two weeks. And I was trying to decide what to do, whether to work or whether or not to work. I knowed all these men. They was good neighbors of mine, good friends of mine. And I just finally decided that I couldn't see going working against a man that was trying to get the benefits that I wanted and everybody else wanted, as far as that was concerned, for his family and hisself.

Before we get too far above, I'd like to back up and. . . What incident caused the walkout on September 20th?

It wasn't no one incident that casued it. It was a whole group of things that caused it. And a lot of 'em was Gandy's fault. And uh, I think these boys went to the Army and they found out there was another world besides Bradley's world. You wouldn't have no idea how Bradley run his world, without you would have been part of it. See, I was raised as one of them people to start with. And uh, for instance now. Here is one thing. Like when I got married and I went to Widen to rent me a house, Gandy calls me in the office. He says, "Now, here Nelson, we've got furniture and we've got stuff to sell up here at the company store to set you up into housekeeping. If you're gonna work for us, you're gonna work for the company." Well, I never said nothing. I knowed if I said airy thing right then I'd get fired. But I just thought "Now, oh, boy, I work for my money and I give you an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. And when I get it I'm gonna spend it to where I get good and ready." Of course, you couldn't say that.

Where did . . .when did Gandy come to Widen?

I'd been there about 2 or 3 weeks when Gandy come there, I think. Or something. Maybe a little longer than that. But I just don't remember the dates. You know, it'd be impossible for me to remember. I know the first time I ever seen Gandy I was [inaudible] on the tippie up there. And the tippie broke down and Gandy come up there on the tippie. That's the first time I ever seen him. Some of 'em told me that's who he was.

What year, about what year was that?

Well, I'd say it was in the last part of '45 or '46.

When was he made general manager or whatever. . . .?

I guess he was from the time he come there, as far as I know.

Did uh, was Gandy promoted over Ad Wilson?

Gandy was the superintendent. He was the boss over all of 'em. Ad Wilson and Garland Craft, too.

Well, a rumor I heard that Ad Wilson was passed over for the superintendent's job.

By Gandy, but Gandy was hired on top. Gandy never worked up to his job atall. See, Garland Craft done that. Wilson worked up to what they got. But there's a thing about Garland Craft that I never hear mentioned any or much, and nothing's said about it during this strike and stuff. Garland Craft was a man that took care of his own business. And he didn't mettle in everybody's affairs. I'd have to say that for Garland. I never heard Garland's name misused at no time.

Well, maybe it wasn't Gandy. Maybe it was Beatty.

Beatty come there after Gandy. A right smart while after Gandy. I think maybe Gandy had something to do with getting Beatty.

Was Beatty given a job over Ad Wilson? Was that one of the reasons for the strike?

Well, you see, uh, no, unh-huh, no, I don't think so. Beatty was a slave driver. And he was a hard man to work for.

What do you mean, a hard man?

A hard man. A lot of people had disagreements with him about the job, about the way he done it and about what he done and the mistreatment that he give 'em.

Be specific. . . can you be more specific?

Well, for instance, of course, this is getting a way up in the thing. But they had a Hamrick boy, Jack Hamrick worked there. And he was a young man and they, for some reason or the other, this is inside. I didn't have no first-hand information about this, other than what. . . Abner Hamrick was a sheriff at the time. And he was working at Widen. And uh, he uh, they wanted to get rid of Jack, and they had to do it in a way that they didn't get in trouble over it, you see. So they had a place that was falling in. They told him to go in there and load coal or to get his pay.

It wasn't over a new machine?

Now, I don't know nothing about that now. Now I don't know what it was. But that was, Abner told me that hisself. I don't believe Abner lied. So the tactics of that kind, there was a lot of stuff pulled off, nobody knowed nothing about 'em, only the feller it was pulled on. Because when a man got fired, he left Widen and left the company's houses and if . . . then they got rid of you.

How did the medical benefits or lack of or . . . ?

Well, I can give you a for instance on that. My wife got sick. And we didn't know what was wrong with her. She was passing out and take dizzy spells and stuff. And she went over here to Dr. Bergman at Clay. And Dr. Bergman told her, asked her if I didn't work at Widen. Yeah. Well, he said, "The thing for you to do is, I'll write up what's wrong with you here and you can take it up to the company doctor." Well, he didn't know about that, I think. But anyway, said, "You can take it to the hospital and get tests run on you so we can find out what's wrong with you, so we'll know what to do with you." So I got the paper he wrote up for my wife and took it up to the company doctor. And uh, they had a Frenchman up there--I can't think of his name. You couldn't understand anything he said, hardly. And I asked him if he'd sign that so I could take my wife to the hospital. In which we paid hospitalization, you see. And uh, he began to give me an argument and said he wouldn't sign it without I'd bring her to her and put what he knowed on it. And I had no confidence in no woman at all. I knowed of him giving a baby a shot up there and in a day or so it died. I don't know whether that's what done it or not. But a lot of people thought that's what done it. And uh, so I told him I wouldn't bring her up there and that I wouldn't let him doctor my dog. I said, "I think you're just a horse doctor and I wouldn't let you doctor my dog!" He got mad and run to old Gandy about it. And Gandy called me in the office and told me that I called the doctor a horse doctor. And I told him, "No, I called him a damned old horse doctor!"

You called him a what old horse doctor?

A damned old-, god-damned old horse doctor. And I wouldn't bring my dog to him. That's my opinion of him. I just didn't think he was capable of doctoring anybody. And Gandy begin to tell me then that there wasn't nothing wrong with my wife, like as if he was a doctor. And then he began to tell about one of her sisters, who was fat and that type of thing. So I just left. I knowed me and Gandy wasn't going to agree on that. And if you worked there, you agreed with Gandy. And I left before I disagreed in a way that he might not like it.

What about the retirement fund? Did you have any complaints over that?

I, of course, I didn't retire. And I had no experience in retirement, other than we were supposed to have a retirement fund they paid into. But I've heard several fellers tell tell about the retirement. And some of 'em drew a hundred dollars a month, I think, from that retirement,

that did retire. But of course, when the company quit, the retiremeretirement quit, you know. And I think most people knowed that was what happened. And if they wanted to get rid of you a year before they retired, or two years before you retired, they could do it and you wouldn't get nothing, see. And they done things like that. A lot of these names I can't think of, because it's been too long.

It's not important. A lot's just a matter of record anyway. Here's a question. How did you get paid? By check, cash or what?

We got paid by check.

When you cashed it in Widen, did you get cash or script?

No, you. . .they had a bank in Widen. You could take your check to the bank and get cash for it. But there's an awful lot of people that worked for Bradley that never drewed a check. Because they would go to the store and buy stuff until they overrun their work. Or, they would go to the store, some of them, this was most usually found in people that got drunk and drunk a lot of beer and whiskey and stuff and a lot of roaming around, you know. They would go to the store and draw script, they would call it. They had a money called script. And they had fifty cents and a quarter and a dollar and had a star with a hole punched in it, in the shape of a star. And they'd take that from the store when they'd draw the script. They had a card they'd put down in there, stamp \$5 or \$10 or whatever you drewed, on the card. Well, you'd take this script and go to the bank and they'd give you cash for that, but they discounted ten cents on the dollar. Trade it to you for the script, see. And that way they could take that script to the bank and get money, ten cents on the dollar, they'd pay more, you know, what it was. And then uh, they could have a little money that way. But I heard a many of time, many a time I've been around the store before now, the company store, and they'd tell 'em "Now, you're gonna have to wait til you work another day before you can get any script." Or, "You're gonna have to wait till you work another day before you get any groceries, see." And of course, we've got them people all over the world, overspending their budget, you know. I never drewed any script in my life.

What did it say on the script?

Well, Elk River Coal & Lumber Company. And some of it said, the older script, said, In Bradley We Trust.

Did you ever see any of that?

That older? Yeah, a long time ago. Yeah.

Now, after the miners walked out on the 20th of September, 1952, you said that after you decided to stay out on strike, you were one of those that went to see Bill Blizzard.

Yeah.

Who are some of the others? Do you remember?

I don't just remember who exactly all it was. But there was several of us went down there. Now, the union had no part in it at all. And that's the thing that's been mislead through the trials and everything else. You see, they had to blame somebody. And uh, the union had had no part in it at all, in no way. It was strictly the men that worked there. And me and Darrell Douglas and several other people--there was 10 or 12 of us, maybe more than that--I don't know. I didn't count them. And a lot of them I forgot. And we went down and went to Bill Blizzard's office, District 17, went in to talk to him. And Bill Blizzard himself told us, he said, "Boys, you've got a tough nut to crack there." And he said, "Now, I won't promise you anything." But he said, "I'll see what I can do." And we went down there for support. Because some of these men, after 4 or 5 weeks or a month, had begin to get hard up. They was needing something to eat, needing some clothes, needing food, needing some way to go, you know. Well, there was some of 'em that did starve out, went back and got a job and worked for Bradley's. [inaudible] but the ones they let come back. But during that time and in the first part of it, these people, Bradley's people, got out and hired everybody they could for \$35 a day for 8 hours to come up there and guard and carry guns and stuff. And uh, at that time, \$35 a day was a lot of money.

Did you ever see a letter signed by Bill Blizzard that was reportedly carried around by 2 unnamed men, pickets saying that \$200,00 was ear-marked to support the strike?

No, no, no, not at no time. Now I think I knowed about that strike as much as anybody.

Had you ever heard that story?

No, never heard that story, either. That's a makeup.

Were there any. . . did Blizzard help you by sending-, organizing assistance up?

No, no sir! Now, that's another thing that's a makeup.

Was Ed Hecklebeck ever around?

That was a man that did come up there from the union and told these men what they could expect if they got a union and how it would be if they got a union. That's what he amounted to. Now, you was talking about funds. Now, I never did tell this before, I don't think. A few people knowed about it. But the way we got funds to buy what we had to eat with and so on, now they, I don't know all about it. But me and another man--I'd rather not mention his name--I know him real well. We went to Coal River, we went to Paint Creek, we went to Cabin Creek, we went to every union local in this part of the country. And these, told the men our situation and what it

was about. And they give us money to bring back to buy groceries with. Now this stuff that Bradley fixed up about the union a doing this and the union a doing that, that's just a bunch of buck. Now, the only thing that Bill Blizzard promised us that they would do, he said, "Now, if you boys "stays with your pig," and, and you need it, we will give you lawyers to represent you in court, if you need it.

Stay with your what?

"Stay with your pig," he says. You know what he meant by that. That was to stay with the strike. And he says, "We'll give you lawyers to represent you, if you need it." Now, that's the only thing that Bill Blizzard promised anybody.

Did a man named Enoch Foley ever show up on the picket line?

Foley, Jim Foley.

E. H.

I don't know. They called him Jim. But, he never amounted to nothing. He come up there and talked a little bit about how we was gonna live and how hard times we was gonna have. They never silver-coated nothing. They never sugar-coated nothing. They just put it to 'em just the way it was. And uh, and uh, then the papers came out with all this union stuff that'd done this and that and the other. That there was the biggest lie that was ever wrote. And Bradley and them had big tales fixed up. They done that to [inaudible] keep the thing a going, you know. And a lot of Bradley's men, a lot of the violence and stuff that was accused onto everybody, was caused by them \$35 a day men so they could keep their job; that's just exactly why. Yeah.

It uh. . . let's put it this way. There apparently were a lot of people showed up on the picket line quite often. Most were local people that didn't, had never worked for Elk River Coal Company.

Yeah, that's right, that's a hundred percent right. And what they was, was just drunks and bums that didn't have no where else to go and they come up to bum something to eat, where we'd went and bummed the money off these other men like Cabin Creek and up in Paint Creek and Coal River and places, and just hang around to get something to eat. I could name you some of them, but I don't want to without I have to.

It's not necessary. Why. . . why didn't you run 'em off? Well, you just don't up and run somebody off from nowhere, I don't think.

Did they create any disturbances, did they call names, throw rocks?

Well, no, not that I know of. I couldn't say that. I don't know that they did. One of them took fits, I know, and liked to scared us all to death. But uh, a whole lot of this, a whole lot and the biggest majority of this so-called violence that went on on the picket lines was fiction.

END OF SIDE 1 - TAPE 1 - BEGIN SIDE 2 - TAPE 1

Where were the picket lines first set up, Mr. Nelson?

Uh, picket lines really wasn't set up. Now, you see, where you get into, people. . .they had to have, had to make out like we was an organization of some kind and had everything organized and so on, to do these things, in order to get the courts to listen to them and so on, and in order to get. . . . That was what people like Charles Ray was hired for, to do them things. And he done a good job. To start with, they come out up there and uh, Gandy talked to them and he promised them this, that and the other to get 'em to go back to work. Well, the men did go back to work and they worked, I think, maybe a week or so, 2 or 3 days or a week, if I can remember. Well, they didn't get nothing that he promised them, so they come back out again.

What did he promise them? Do you recall?

Oh, he was gonna fix everything up that they wanted, yeah. Had a meeting up at uh, at the ball park up above Widen and he got up on a truck or something there and he told them that he'd see that this was done and that was done and so on. And. . .but anyway, it wound up he didn't do nothing, just back to the same thing again. And they come out again. Well, when they come out that time, these fellers went to punching them guns around at 'em, tell 'em how they were gonna shoot 'em and stuff.

Who are these fellers?

Well, Ronald Tolbert was one of them and Darrell Woods was one of them, and Chilton Wilson was one of them and a lot of them done that. I could name you a lot. Dean Gray and I don't know, there was a lot of them. And they went to punching them guns around. They gonna shoot this fellow and that one and the other. And then they went to hollering that union stuff, you know. Union's didn't have nothing in it. It was just the men that worked at Widen. They was wanting someone to listen to their tale. They was wanting somebody to do something about it, you know. Have some way of reasoning with the company, in other words.

There was one case where the younger miners, Dennis Zirkle and Doyle Wagner and some others I don't know, about seven of them, ran for election to fill a vacancy on the miners league.

I didn't know about that.

You remember that?

I didn't know nothing about that, no. No, no, no. I didn't know about it at all. But then they forced them out of Widen, you know. So the men just went as far as they forced them. They forced them up the top of the hill.

How did they force them up to the top of the hill?

Well, with these guns that I was talking about, see. Punching the guns at 'em and tell them how they were gonna shoot 'em and I don't know what all. Well, this was a bunch of farmers, working men, people that knowed all this. But I'm getting ahead of my story because a lot of these like Byrne Wilson and that type person, worked for Bradley and never done nothing. He went to the mines and got his pay like he was a working man. And you couldn't catch Byrne a working at nothing. Well, there was Vess Mullins, which was a legislature man that worked there. And he never done nothing that I ever seen him a doing. And I said, "What are you supposed to be doing, Vess?" He was legislature man, elected from the county. "Oh," he said, "I hand out light bulbs." And he hung around the electric shop up there. And I don't know if he ever did hand out one or not. I never did catch him at it. And uh, so uh. . . then he had a lot of them kind of people that paid, was supposed to be working men that didn't do nothing. They went out and got their pay and their check. But when these crisis came up, like the men coming out on a strike or something, then their job started, you see.

Okay. The pickets moved back to the top of [inaudible]

Up to the top of the hill, yeah.

About, that's about 2 weeks after the strike started? Or about a week?

Well, I'd say approximately, the 2nd time they come out, see. The first time they came out they went back to work. Was gonna work if he'd do something. But the 2nd time then I don't think it was much more than 2 or 3 days when they came out, til they moved out to the top of the hill. Now I don't know about these dates. Because you just don't remember things like that, or I don't. And uh, the first thing that I knowed though, was that I come home and stayed about 2 weeks before I went back, trying to make up my mind. I wanted to know what I was gonna do. I'd been raised a Bradley boy and I didn't know nothing else but that. And uh, that's talking about yourself. But I'm just putting it like it is. And uh, I went up to the top of the hill. And they'd drove 'em out of there while I was at home, see. And they was telling me about 'em using guns on 'em and threatening them, and how Byrne Wilson was carrying on and jumping up and down and cussing them and so on and so forth. And 2 or 3 or 4 other fellers was down in there. Well, of course, they was getting paid for that, they'd do a good job of it, you know. And all these men that was out there a striking was doing it on their own. They was. . . wasn't getting paid nothing by nobody, in no way. And uh, I know I was up there that evening. Here come

Ronald Tolbert and Dean Gray and some of them Wood's, maybe Don and Darrell, I don't know. And a lot of other people from down in there. I didn't know 'em all. In a car. A whole car full of 'em. There was three fellows to the seat. All of them had pistols. Big old pistols, .38 specials, looked to me like. They drove up there and begin to call these pickets names and stuff like that, telling you, "Yes, you, Goddamn, you," stuff like that. Well, they started sticking their guns out the windows and pointing them at 'em, you know. And uh, so in a little bit, these pickets kept ganging around the car, coming up closer. You could tell they didn't like it. They was calling 'em, you know, they wasn't saying nothing to none of them. And just now that car just flipped up on its back right in the road. These fellers came out of there squalling over the hill and run down into the woods and run off yonder and run this a way and that way and guns flying all over the road. And uh, some of them, as they run through the woods, got hit in the back with a rock and stuff like that. I seen a lot of this happen. I don't know who done any of it, though.

Do you have a good right arm?

And uh, no, not a very good one. And so, they all run off and went back to Bradley. Well, then is when they went and got old Charles Ray, hired gunman. And they went and got a court order and got all these thugs in there then. They began to getting 'em in, bringing them in. Well, then the first thing I-, last count on them I had there was seventeen of them. Then they had Ray and a bunch of other people in there that I didn't know nothing about it. Didn't want to know nothing about him, because that's Ray's own business. And Ray didn't have nothing in that. That was between Bradley's people and Bradley. And he lived off over yonder at Gandyville or somewhere the other side of Spencer, I hear. And he had to be a hired gun in order to come in there and do that, you see. And a man who'll hire out to kill somebody with a gun, ain't much [inaudible] to him. I don't care who he is.

What do you know about the stopping of the two federal probation officers?

I don't know nothing about it. Don't know a thing in the world about that.

Were you on the line where. . .

Not that I know of. Anybody that'd stop. . . . A lot of the stopping was done, was done in this way. Them people'd come up there and go to cussing them boys and calling them bad names. They was good people. They was farmers, most of them, like myself. They'd been raised here. They was honest people. And it's like Roscoe Bailes. Roscoe told 'em he shot into that convoy because he was a religious man, and he thought he ought to tell the truth about it. Well, they was forty-seven people there and there wasn't nobody admitted to shooting into that convoy but Roscoe. And Roscoe's the feller that got stuck with it. He was the only feller that would admit it, that he shot into that convoy.

Were there any women on the picket line up there?

Yeah, a lot of times. There was men that'd bring their wives with them and sometimes their kids with them. Yeah.

I was thinking about Mary Crookshanks.

Well, Mary Crookshanks was, I believe she was John Crookshanks wife, I believe was his name. I'm not sure about that. But anyway, Mary Crookshanks was up there. Mary was a, was an old time woman, that's all she was. She believed in what she was doing and she stood up for what she believed. And I respected her for that.

Did you see the sheriff or his dep-, regular deputies up there at any time?

Yeah.

What did they do when they were there?

Well, at one time, well, I'm getting a way ahead of myself now. You see, we had. . . (you had two sheriffs) when this first started, Abner Hamrick was the sheriff (No) wasn't it? (Sheriff Wilson) oh, yeah, Red Wilson. Yeah. Red was the sheriff. Red was a company man. When it first started, Red guarded people that would come up there and let 'em sneak 'em over there at Dundon and put 'em on a train so they wouldn't have to go past the pickets, you see. Because these pickets did holler at 'em and call them scabs and stuff, you know. And they'd sneak over there and get on the train and they'd send 'em up Widen and they'd stay in Widen and work up there, you know. And Bradley'd pay 'em \$35 a day if they would guard for him, [inaudible] punch it out with them pickets and call them bad names. See, what the idey was, was to get these pickets to do something so they'd get the law on 'em.

Pickets didn't holler bad names back?

They did, yes, sir. You go to putting a bunch of men out here and calling them all kinds of bad names then they're gonna holler back at you, ain't they?

How about stopping cars? Did you see cars stopped?

As far as a car being stopped, I don't believe that tale at all. Because there was never a time that I ever seen a car go through there and I was there a lot, that he couldn't have drove on, went on about his affairs. At no time. Now there was some cars come up there and stopped, just like I told you about them guards. They sent 'em up there for that reason. So they could get more for these pickets, so they could get court orders and get the judge to order them not to do this and the other, you know. And they used it for that purpose. And then they'd take their men

and go for witnesses. Like when they tried me for the Red Man's Act. They had the same men on the jury, on the grand jury, that was on my jury, company men. . . see. Not all of them now. On the petit jury. But some of them.

Did you

And so, now that's how fair it was. And this thing of the pickets done this, the pickets done that, every petition. . . . Now, I admit, the pickets was goaded into doing some things that may have not been right. But I'd say that everything they done, they was goaded into it by these thugs that he hired. Now they was hired for that reason and that's what they done.

Did you see the state police up there in the early part of the strike?

I seen the state police up there a lot of times. Now, we had Sam Whitman. I have no other idey-, now, I can't prove this. But I know that Sam was paid by Bradley. The things that Sam done. Sam would get drunk, I seen him a drinking whiskey on the job. State police don't do things like that. If they're the right kind of state police.

Did the crowd or a bunch of people--crowds a bad word--did they pick up-, back into a state police car one time?

Not that I know of. I don't know of nothing like that. But uh, this, this uh, is a hard thing to thing to think about, all the happenings that went on until it, the way it is. Because you can't remember all that stuff. And uh, that's like the Richard Nichols deal. That never was brought out just the way it was. Richard through his farm down there to clean out his springs so his cattle could have water to drink. . . on his own place. And Johnny Johnson lived on Richard's place in Richard's house.

The house that Richard lived in at the time?

No, Richard didn't live in that house. Johnny Johnson lived in a house that was on this place that he inherited it from his dad when his dad died. And uh, Johnny shot Richard and killed him. The state police picked Johnny up and Johnny admitted shooting Richard and killing him. Well, now, here's another thing that happened. When after the state police caught him and brought him down to jail, you see, Junior Kuhn's was sheriff at the time. Well, the sheriff goes over there and goes in Johnny's house without a warrant and that throwed the whole business away. Of course, at the same time, this Berry from up here at Sutton was Johnny's lawyer. And from all I could find out, now, it's just like paying them thugs up there. The lawyer's tried to find out if them, where them fellers was getting their money, these hired guns. And they could never find out how they was getting paid or where they was getting their money at. The only thing they could get out of 'em was that they wasn't getting no money. They was working for nothing. That's all they could get out of 'em. But, we did find out to our satisfaction, that Bradley had

paid Johnny Johnson's lawyer for defending him in court. Well, Bradley had no connections to Johnny Johnson whatsoever. Until the strike. And of course, we come to the conclusion that Bradley had hired Johnny to shoot Richard. And my dad was the first feller that found Richard after he was shot.

In the newspaper you read about hillside pillboxes.

Now that's, no, that's

I don't know whether they refer to the pickets or whether they refer to positions around the company's installation.

Well, not the company had men around these bridges and places and had built them a pillbox out of cross ties, you know. That guard, so-called guard, you know, and sometimes they'd take spells shooting and they'd just shoot up a storm around there, you know. I don't know what they was shooting at. But one time I went to Widen and there was a bunch of them guards over there in that mine, on Rock Camp, in the entrance there. They went to shooting at me as I went up the road in my truck. And they shot at me as long as they could see me. And I went on up on the hill and reported it to the state police. I didn't know there was state police up there. They had different ones. And I told them they was shooting at me over there. And he said, "Well, by God, you better just stay away from there." And I was just going up the road. I was on the hard road.

Do you know anything about the bridges being blown?

No, the only thing I know about that is what I've read about in the paper. And uh, I believe half of that was done by them guards, to keep their job a guarding.

How about the power station getting blown?

I don't know nothing about that either. Other than just what I read about it. And I believe that, I actually believe that half of that stuff or more. . . . I'm not a clearing the pickets of it. They could have done some of it, maybe. But I would say that half or more of it was done by their own people, so they could keep their jobs \$35 a day guarding. Then \$35 for eight hours was a lot of money.

Do you know anything about the Mack rail bus being stopped?

Well, now you're talking about, they called it the Jitney bus. (That's right) Motor B. Yeah. Yeah, that was a fixed thing, and we fell right into it. That, I don't know. Now I didn't know nothing about none of it, only we went up to Swandale. And we was fooling around there, just talking and we was talking about the strike and what we was gonna do to, you know, to live and so on and so forth. A bunch of us was just sitting around there talking. There was a bunch of

pickets, a bunch of people was on picket line. But we wasn't there for no reason whatsoever that we knowed about. We met there and went to stop and talk to one another, just like anybody would. Well, for some reason or the other, this outfit had found out that we was down there. Well, just in a little bit here comes this motor down the road. Well, I'd worked for the company on the line, I'd worked on the railroad all my life. I knowed everybody that worked for the company about, or a lot of them. And it stopped right above us and went to raking the gears on it and punching and a raking around. And of course, naturally we went up there to see what was going on or what it was, or just what was going on. But later on we found out after that, that they'd sent these men down there to shoot some of us and cause a big fight so they could get warrants for us and put us in jail to get rid of us. That's what they said they done it for. So when we got up there, went up to the motor and the same people just scrounging around and a grabbing and a thumping around and me and Jack Lanham and my brother-in-law, Ernest Bailey and oh, several of us there. We got up on there and we knowed them people. And here they was trying to get their gun loaded so they could shoot us. Had shells scattered all over the floor. There was three or four pistols laying in the floor. And they seen us come in, they acted like it scared 'em to death, and they throwed their guns down and scattered their shells all over the floor. So Scott Williams was on there. And that's what they got [inaudible] hitting Scott. Scott hit at me and when he hit at me, I busted him right in the kisser. And whenever he straightened up a little bit, I busted him another time or two. I knocked him outside and so, Sterling Nelson jumped off the motor and run off. And I don't know where he went to. But the next day--I'll tell this while I think of it--my dad was working on the railroad at that time down there at Dundon; he was section foreman. And he said as soon as I went out to work, here comes Sterling down the road and his britches about all tore off of him and he uh, had been wading the creek, all the way from Swandale into Dundon. Pop says to him, he says, "Sterling, what's the matter with you?" "Why," he said, "them union fellers got after us, after us," and he said, "I jumped off that motor and I waded Buffalo plumb from Swandale down to here." And he said, "I'm just wore plumb out." And he said, "Every time I stopped I could hear them fellers a talking." Why, there wasn't nobody knowed where Sterling went to and didn't care. And uh, that's the way a lot of them tales was, they was just tales and told and there wasn't nothing in the world to it.

What about the train that was hit by shots? Allegedly hit by shots?

I don't, that's just heresy, as far as I know. I don't know. I couldn't tell you about it.

Okay. I know there were a lot of cars dynamited, barns burned. And this was on both sides.

Yeah. Somebody dynamited Richard Nichols's tractor. Before he got shot. And somebody, now, right here's a, uh, one morning we was up at the picket line. I was up there. Just now here come Buck Carte and oh, Buck Carte and one of the Woods'.

Is Buck Carte the one they call Buster?

Yeah, that's Buster. He was just a drunk, a no-good. And one of the Woods', but he was one of their thugs they hired up there, see. You could get any kind of a man to pick up a gun [inaudible] without he's a certain kind of a person. And that's what I said about Rafe coming over there sticking his nose into something that didn't concern him. They come up by the picket line and said "John Rader, your barn's on fire." John Rader was one of the pickets, and me and John was up there on the picket. Well, all right. Sure enough, they'd come from setting John's barn on fire. Then they went off and told that me, Virgle Nelson and John Rader, was playing poker in his barn and got it on fire. And we wasn't even down there. That was John Rader's own barn. And then my brother-in-law, Ernest Bailey, lived up there in a house, had to park his truck up this road. They come along one morning and shot it full of holes. And he knowed who done it. I don't know for sure. I just took his word for what he said. And uh, they was lots of them things happening. And lots of 'em. I do know the pickets might have done a few things that they shouldn't have done. But I think most of it was brought on by them thugs they hired, them guards they hired. They was mean men. They was people that didn't care for nothing. And they enjoyed doing them type things.

Things quieted down during the winter, quite a bit.

Well, you starve a feller long enough and like them pickets wasn't, they wasn't paid by nobody. They didn't have any money. They didn't have no way of living. They couldn't get no unemployment. You live fourteen months without any work, without any money coming in at all, you [inaudible] at a bad place.

How did you feed yourself?

Well, I was a little better off than the rest of 'em. I had a farm and had my cattle and my wife cans a lot of stuff. And we lived cheaper than most people. I know one time when the strike first started, the first two or three weeks or a month of it, Shorty Thompson was a man down here that lived down here below Macel. He come up there and told us, he said, "Now, I'm gonna have to go back to work. My family's a starvin', and I'm a starvin'." And he says, "Now, I'm gonna have to go back to work to get some food somewhere for my family." We went out between us and made enough money to bought him all the groceries he could get in his car. And after we done that, we had \$15 left over. And we give that to Shorty. And we come back home. The next day, Shorty went over at Dundon and Fred Wilson sneaked him over there and got him on the train, sent him to Widen and he went back to work a guardin', and come out the next day or two, a pointin' his gun at us and telling us how he was gonna shoot us. Yeah. Now, that's the truth about it. How many times have you seen stuff like that put in the paper?

Okay. On May the 5th, 1953, the camp was bulldozed. Do you remember. . . were you at the camp at that time?

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

I wasn't up there when they had the bulldozer up there. But the company men [inaudible] everything that was there, all but where I think they had a barrel or something there to build a fire in, to stand around.

Either the 5th or the 6th of May, there was an egg throwing incident up there. Were you on the line at that time?

No, uh-huh, no.

Then on the night of the 6th and 7th of May, they, the company ran two convoys past the cook shack at Dille.

Now, wait a minute, if we're gonna get into cook shack, we'll start at the first of it and then we'll know.

Okay. When did they set up the cook shack?

They set up the cook shack during the last, oh, I'd say it'd been going on for four or five months or longer before they set up the so-called cook shack, they called it. But now, what that was, was Dewey Triplett's garage. It was a cinder block garage. (I seen it) And they got, they went over there and some of them did, and fixed meals, you know, for somebody that was up on the picket line. And they'd fix 'em a meal; they'd go over there and eat their dinner or supper or whatever, if ever they was up there that long and they wanted to eat, they'd go over there and eat. That's all it was. And Dewey was on the strike, the same as the rest of us. Dewey was an awful good man, he believed in what he believed in and he was an honest man. I think if you'll check right down to the guts of the thing, all them fellers that was pickets that worked for Bradley at the time was farmers and honest citizens. People that paid taxes and was honest people. But, then we go on to where that incident happened at the cook shack. I was there.

Were you there all night?

I was there all night.

Were you there when the convoy went by?

I was there when the convoy went by.

There were two convoys. (Yeah) The first one. How many cars?

What happened there was they, these thugs that I've been talking about, come over there and told us people that was at Dewey Triplett's garage, that they was gonna run us out of there that night. "Goddamn you, we're gonna shoot you out of here!"

Was that the first time they came there?

That was the first time they come over there.

How many cars?

Uh, I believe, I don't know whether I counted them or not. Seems to me like there was six or eight cars. Something of that. And they was, these guards that I was talking about was in these cars. And so uh, we didn't say anything. Oh, some of them might have smarted off a little bit. You always have a smart alec in every crowd, you know. So we got out of there and went to Summersville. Tried to get the sheriff over there, tried to talk to the judge. Couldn't get the judge to do nothing, couldn't get the sheriff to do nothing. Went to the state police, they wouldn't do nothing.

Why did you go to Summersville? That's still in Clay County.

Well, we couldn't get nothing done in Clay County. Summersville's in Nicholas County. And uh, we tried every law officer and every law that we knowed anything about, to find out about, to get 'em to do something. Because them guards were gonna come over there. They told us, and shoot us. That's what they said they was gonna come and do, at 4 o'clock the next morning. "We're gonna come and shoot you out of here." And a lot of cuss words with it. But that didn't mean nothing no how. So uh, all the law officers and everybody else wouldn't do nothing. They said they wouldn't do nothing. The judge wouldn't do nothing. So that was Dewey Triplett's property. He owned it. It belonged to him. And everybody always thought he had a right to defend his own, didn't he? And uh, so at 4 o'clock here they come down the hill.

I'd like to, before we get into that, are you sure there's only six or eight cars?

Well, that's just the best of my memory. Now, I don't-, I could be wrong about it. I wouldn't state no specific number, because I wouldn't want to do that because I . . . I didn't. . . I wasn't counting cars. Whenever somebody goes to shooting at you, by God, you ain't gonna count many cars.

I'm talking about the first convoy.

Well, the first convoy, uh, I wouldn't be sure about it. There was several of them; I don't know how many.

We won't beat that horse to death. Now the second convoy, where were you when it came by?

Well, let's don't go pin this down too tight. (Okay) Let's see now, let me think just a minute. I

was. . . when the second convoy came down by I was in Dewey Tanner's basement. (Dewey?) Not Dewey Tanner, Dewey Triplett's basement. Dewey Tanner's another feller. He didn't have nothing to do with it in no way. But uh, now, after, after the convoy went by, there was a lot of shootin', both sides was shootin' at each other, bullets was just a whizzing, both ways. And you see, now the company fixed that up so they said that there wasn't no shots fired from the convoy, see, I mean the company. And these, well, old Sam Whitman was over there. He had a hand in that. Sam was bought and paid for. And I can't prove that. But I know enough about it to know it's true, to satisfy myself, that's the only feller I had to satisfy, was myself. After the convoy went down, just a little bit, here there's a car that run over the hill right down here, right down below the cook shack. And it went into the holler down there. And Jack Dodrille jumped out of it and blew it all over him, hollering that somebody got killed, somebody killed. Well, Hell, you can't expect anything else if you were gonna shoot the feller and he was gonna shoot back at you. Somebody was gonna get hurt there directly, ain't they? Well, that's the way it always was where I was at. And uh. . . .

END OF SIDE 2 - TAPE 1 - BEGIN SIDE 1 - TAPE 2

. . . .Go ahead, sir.

Now, when they shoot at you, you usually expect to get shot back at. And that's usually what happens. Because Dewey Triplett owned the place. And he had invited us in there and was part of us. And Jack jumped out of the car, run up there along the road, you could see over there, blood all over. Said Charles Frame had got shot. Well, when they went down there, the state police come in just a jiffy. They was bound to be a sittin' just out of sight up there and just as quick as this happened, they ran down there. Well. . . .

Did you. . . now, this is important. Do you know, can you give me an estimate of how many minutes it was from the time of the shooting 'til the state police arrived.

I could give you an estimate of the best of my memory. And it couldn't have been more than three to four minutes. Couldn't have been more than that. And they ran right into that, arresting everybody that was in the cook shack. And so uh, when they got 'em all arrested and everything, they took me and I forgot who else it was in a car, the state police did.

Were you in the cook shack by this time?

Yeah. Yeah, I went down to the cook shack. It was just a jump from the house, you know, just as far as from here out to the road there. But anyway, a little bit farther than that maybe. But it wasn't but just a little piece. They took me and somebody else and I swear I can't think of who

that was.

It's in the report.

In the car. . . . And the state police took us down in the car. But all these other fellows, they had one of these [inaudible] trucks, company trucks. They backed it up there and they just drove 'em up in there like a bunch of cattle. And when they got 'em all in, they said, "Now run the Goddamned sons-of-bitches over the hill!" That's what they said.

Who said that?

State police and them guards. See, all these guards were ganged around there with their guns. After the state police come and we weren't going to fight the state police. We weren't going to fight nobody. "Run the Goddamned sons-of-bitches over the hill now." Well, anyway, they took these trucks loaded with these pickets down to jail.

Oh, for God sakes. Go ahead.

And they took 'em down to jail and put us all, had us all in that little old county jail down there. Then they go and get these company guards and places them around the jails with rifles and on top the jail like we was a bunch of criminals or something. You'd have to watch like a mad dog! And old [name inaudible] Bailes sat out in front of the jail with a gun, laughed at us and giggled at us and made light of us, you know.

I'm going to ask you a hard question. Don't answer it if you don't feel like it. Did you have a gun with you that night?

I wouldn't answer that question for nobody.

Okay. I had to answer it, you know that.

But I know that Roscoe Bailes didn't kill that feller. How I know it that's my affair.

Okay. That's all I'm ever gonna ask you.

I believe Jack Dodrill shot him in the back of the head. The man was shot in the back of the head. And he was looking over next to the cook shack and the bullet had entered in the back of his head. And there wasn't no way it could have done that if Jack hadn't shot him.

Okay. That's all I'm gonna ask on that. Okay, after you were put in jail. . . .

Well, that night here the state police come up there, took 'em out one at a time, was questioning

them, see. Well, they took me over to the courtroom and I went to talking to I believe his name was Williams, I believe was his name. Now, I'm not sure about these state police names, because I didn't know 'em that well at that time. And he talked to me awhile and I . . . I just talked to him like I would anybody. And uh, directly [inaudible name] came in. Bonar, he talked to me a little bit. I talked to him.

Pleasantly?

No, he wasn't a bit pleasant, neither one of them wasn't. And I just had to agree or disagree just to try to get along. Because I'd seen Dave Woods after they'd beat him up. And I figured that's what was coming. So just in a little bit they takes me in another room and Guthrie, there's a big police Guthrie, isn't there? Well, he was standing on one side of me and Williams on the other side of me and they sat me on a chair like this. And Guthrie, he laid his hand on one shoulder and Williams was on the other shoulder. Lieutenant Reger, who runs this here paleography machine, lie detector, he jerks my arm out there and says "I'm gonna put the paleography machine on you." I said, "No, I'm refusing it." "Don't matter a damn whether you do or not. I'm gonna put it on you anyhow." Bonar or Guthrie and Williams was standing on each side of me. They shoved down on my shoulders, you know, and took their black jack out in their hands. So he straps this machine on me. So he went to talking to me then, accusing me of doing everything that was done during the strike, all kinds of stuff, too many things to be. . . . it ain't possible to remember. He sets his foot up between my legs on the chair, hit me up on the nose with his finger, called me a Goddamned lying son-of-a-bitch and I don't know what all. And I just told him right then, I said, "Well, now, I see that you boys is either figuring on beating me up, or beating the something out of me, whether it's the truth or lie or whatever, so I don't see whether I can help my situation by either lying to you or telling you the truth or anything else. Because it looks like I'm gonna get it anyhow." And uh, so he put in from 9 o'clock that night until 3 o'clock the next morning calling me a Goddamned lying sons-of-bitches. Cause Reger done that. And these two fellers are standing one on each side of me, holding my shoulder. Then which they had a black jack out in their hand, part of the time. Not all the time, but part of the time. And I come to the conclusion that they was gonna beat the hell out of me there. Had me scared to death! I tried my best not to show it. . . in any way. And I just sat there. And he just kept calling me liars and sons-of-bitches, that I'd done this and "You know Goddamned well you done that," and "You're just an ornery so and so." That went on from 9 o'clock til 3 o'clock the next morning. Well, at 3 o'clock that next morning, I admit that I was getting awful nervous. And I just had about half the sense that I ought to have. They took me in the courtroom or the judges room, and there was a table there. Said, "Sit on that table." Bonar. Bonar done this. So I sat up on that table and he took his gun off and it was loaded and everything 'cause I could see in it, you know, his holster. And he laid it on a chair right beside the table. Just took the belt buckle, doubled it around the gun, laid it on this chair. And outside he went. Well, I, I didn't fall for that, because I knew better than that. I knowed what he laid it down there for. I knowed what he was thinking. So I just laid down on the table like I went to sleep. But I couldn't have went to sleep at all. I'd been, never was missed, never was as abused as bad in my life.

Did they slap you or hit you around?

None other than just shoved my shoulder down. And Reger would hit me up around my nose with his finger. And he'd hit me hard on the nose with his finger! Of course, you couldn't keep from thinking a lot of stuff. But I didn't say nothing because I knowed anything I'd say would make it worse. So at 3 o'clock he takes me in the courtroom where the judges chambers was, and I laid back on that table like I went to sleep. Bonar went out and stayed with his pistol laying there on that chair. He went out and stayed about 20 minutes, I'd say, something of that sort. He come back in directly and I was laying there on my back like I was asleep. I wasn't asleep. I couldn't have went to sleep, I never went to sleep for two nights. And uh, said now, "Virgle, you just tell us all about this or the Lord'll never forgive you for it." Said, "I know your sisters and your brothers will all forgive you for it. And go to the pen like a man ought to and take your medicine." I didn't have nothing that I'd go to the pen for. I'd never done nothing to nobody in my life that I wouldn't have done to me under the same situation. I don't mean to say that I never done nothing to nobody. But I'll say it that way.

Okay.

And I mean it that way. And uh, I was never so mistreated in my life like I was right there. And uh, of course, this sounds like a feller's a bragging, but I never had nothing to stick to me as bad as that did. I caught Reger outside and just choked the shit out of him after that, too. And he just humped up and turned blue and went to shaking all over. And I was ashamed to hit him. But I couldn't hardly keep from it at all. I tried my best. I begged the man to take one swing at me. I'd have died before I let that man whoop me. He'd had to beat me to death because I'd have died right there first. And uh, now, this thing has been told in a lot of different ways. A lot of lies have been told about it. And an awful lot of people have had an awful lot of hardships on account of it. But I, I don't, I don't think if the truth would actually been known by honest people, it would have went on like it did. I don't think they would have. . . no, sir. I believe in what we done, just as I did the day I done it. If I hadn't, I wouldn't do it.

What about, you had, and there's no other way to put it, numerous indictments against you.

Yeah, I had five different indictments against. Alvie Bailes went over there and swore that me and Gilbert Hamrick jumped on his car and beat his car. And we never touched Alvie Bailes or his automobile. He drove up the road, come up out of Dundon down there. Me and Gilbert's standing there talking. Gilbert was a cousin of mine. And he hollered something or other at us. I don't know what he said, I couldn't hear him. Gilbert said, "If you're gonna talk to us, you're gonna have to come up a little closer. We can't hear you." He was sitting way out younder hollering at us. And that's all that was done or said. I don't know what Alvie ever said. But Alvie went right over town and got a warrant for me and Gilbert for beating on his car. . . and jumping onto it. And that was the biggest, just a big lie, that's all it was. Well, on this motor

thing up there. I was down in the restaurant during this trial for the motor. One of these thugs was down there, this Sleepy Dawson, they called him. Now, I ain't sure about what his first name was. I didn't know the man that well. He jerks a pistol out and sticks it up in my gut, "Goddamned you, I'm gonna shoot you for whooping my brother-in-law, Scott Williams." Well, I said, "You just lay that gun down and I'll give you some of the same thing."

Where was that?

That was in a restaurant, the Big Star Restaurant, down there in Clay. And he stood there and got to shaking so bad and got scared so bad that I was afraid he was gonna shoot me. And directly, some woman in there said, there was a whole group of people, a lot of people in there. And they was running and squalling and hollering and some woman said, "Get the town cop out there to come in here and get this gun away from this dummy." Well, he grabs it up and turns and runs out the door as hard as he can go up to the sheriff's office, and went in the sheriff's office. Bonar was in there. And just as I got there, Bonar said, "Well, you Goddamned dummy you, you oughtn't to have went down there and jerked that gun out on that feller. And I tried to get a warrant for him for having a gun down there in the street. And I couldn't even get a warrant for him. Couldn't even indict him. I tried to get a warrant from (Judge Duffield?) no, no, I tried to get the warrant from Arnold. . . Arnold Williams was the JP at the time. He's dead now. And uh, couldn't even get a warrant. I went in and told the sheriff about it. Sheriff wouldn't do nothing about it. . .for the simple reason because Bradley was paying the sheriff at that time.

Was Belle Hamrick a JP then?

Yeah, but they'd already done disqualified Belle because Belle tried to be fair about [inaudible] Now Belle Hamrick was just a person like myself, she's been raised here in the country and I knowed her all my life. Belle Hamrick was a fair person. And Bradley's money just flipped her out, that's all. You don't understand these things without you've knowed about it and knowed some of it.

Was Judge Duffield a fair person?

Well, when Judge Duffield was a . . .well, after they had my trial, they made me all kinds of offers, you know, when they was having the trial. And anybody could see through it. What they was wanting to do was get a conviction on anybody. It didn't make any difference who it was. So they could write it up in the paper, that they'd convicted a picket or something, see. And so they could send him to the pen and get rid of him, and make a big spill about it. When they was, had the trial and Henry McClain was Bradley's lawyer--Henry's a good lawyer and a good man--I think a lot of Henry. Henry worked at any job he was hired to do. And uh, they made me all kinds of offers. If I'd confess to that, they'd . . .they'd give me two years and they'd give me a suspended sentence and they'd give me probation and I don't know what all. I said, "Fellers,

I'm not gonna confess to nothing unless I'm guilty. And if I'm guilty I'll tell you I done it." And I told them I smacked those [inaudible] went to write up whatever he writes up after that, you know, to instruct the jury. I went in the judge's chambers with him. He was writing that up. He said he wanted me to be in there. 'Cause I think the judge was afraid somebody would shoot me. I think that's what he was afraid of, the way he acted.

Do you think Judge Duffield was fair and impartial?

I think he was, so far as I know he was. As best as he could be. But like Byrne Wilson got up there and swore a lot of stuff that wasn't so. They had people come down there [inaudible] believe Byrne on oath or anywhere else. Byrne and Chilton both. And of course, Bradley kept [inaudible] And uh, but I think as far as Judge Duffield could be, he was kind of in the shape that we was in. And I think Judge Duffield would tell you that, if you'd ask him. So much money that was used and Bradley controlled the politics from the state house to Widen all over the county, everything in this county was controlled by Bradley. And he, Judge done all he could do, tried to be as fair as he could be; I'd have to say that. And I believe that. And there's a lot of other things I know about it. I just can't think of all of them.

Well, you were indicted under the "Red Man's Act". Now that's a federal offense.

Yeah, probably is, I don't know that much about it. What I started to tell you about being in the judges chambers awhile ago. I talked to Judge Duffield a lot while I was in there and he talked to me like a decent human being. And I told the judge, I said, "I don't know nothing about law. I was never in law myself. Never went to school enough for it, never studied any of it. I think I know right from wrong. I think I know how to be fair with anybody. But I said, "As far as law's concerned, I don't know nothing about the law." And I look back on it now and I know more than I knowed at that time about the procedure of law. I don't see how in the world I kept from going to the penitentiary. Because I didn't know enough to talk for myself. And that's the truth.

Here's a question. How could you afford attorneys?

The union afforded attorneys for us. Now that's the one thing they did do. And as far as I know, that's all the money they spent on it anyway, was the attorneys. Now, they uh. . .that's what. . .that's what Bill told us when we went and talked to him. He said, "We will furnish you an attorney. . . if you need it."

In 1953 district 17 members were assessed \$4 per member to support the Widen miners.

Well, I didn't know anything about that. The only thing I knowed about was we went to a lot of these locals around 17 and they give us money. Me and . . . I'd rather, if it'd be necessary, I'd tell the feller's name. But I don't think it would help him or anybody, and it might cause a bad reflection on him.

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

They had a food handout point over around Ivydale or on Ivydale Road. Do you know where that was?

At Ivydale. That was at Ivydale right close to the post office there. And it wasn't only food, there was a lot of people that had to have clothes, you know, and they'd buy jeans, you know. And they'd, this money that we got would buy a side of bacon and uh, the ones of 'em that smoked, they bought Prince Albert [tobacco] and they rolled their own.

Who ran that . . .

Darrell Douglas.

Okay. Mr. Nelson, for all the warrants and indictments, you say there were five indictments against you?

Best as I remember, yeah.

Were you tried on any of these?

I was tried on the "Red Man's Act" twice, and it was a hung jury both times.

Where was the trial?

At Clay Courthouse.

And Judge Duffield was the presiding judge?

Yeah.

Were you convicted of anything?

[hound dog crying in background]

No, no.

How many people do you know of that were convicted of anything? And actually served time.

No-, none of 'em.

Tony George?

No. No, there wasn't none of 'em served time. You see, Roscoe Bailes, they convicted him of shooting at Charles Frame, but he didn't serve no time. He wasn't in jail a minute over it. The longest any of 'em was in jail was when they took us all down there in that man trip truck and I believe it was eight days we all, forty-seven of us was in jail. And uh, [inaudible] this time was when the state police give us that third degree.

Were you the only people they gave the third degree to?

No, uh, several of the rest of them was given pretty near the same treatment. But I believe I was the longest. I believe they kept me in there longer than any of the rest of 'em.

How about Dennis Graham?

Dennis-, well, I know very little about Dennis Graham. He was took to Charleston and they give him the treatment. I don't know how much or I. . .you know, I just couldn't say. What I do know is heresy. (Okay)

After the strike failed, and it failed. . . (Yeah, oh, yeah, it had to fail). . .what happened to those [tape interference] Now that you got your hound there pacified there, sir. What happened to those miners that were active strikers after the strike was over? Active pickets.

Oh, they went to Ohio and everywhere else and got jobs. They was . . .I don't think there was any of them went back to Widen, not to my knowledge. There was a bunch of men had their mind made up, they were gonna have working conditions or they wouldn't work there. And that's just what happened. They uh, went to Ohio and other places. My brothers-in-law, some of them stayed around here and worked construction.

And you went back to farming?

No, I worked on construction for a few year. Went down to Cape Canaveral and got me a job, worked two months. Took me two months to get a job and I worked two months down there. But I didn't like it in Florida. And I just decided I was gonna live here and come back home. And I was working on construction. And I'd put in an application for a school bus driving job. And one day they called me and said come to work driving a school bus. That's been nineteen year ago, a little past nineteen. And I've been driving a school bus.

I think that's all I have right now. I know if I think of anything or find I've missed anything, I'll make a note and I may come back. And if you find that you. . . .

I've missed a lot of stuff. Cause there's a lot of things, you can't remember it all, there's so many things. And there's a lot of important things that I just don't remember that I couldn't

think of.

It'll come back.

There's a lot of these things I would have liked to have seen something done about and been fair about it. People don't realize that Bradley owned this county and everybody in it. What Bradley said went and what he didn't want to go, didn't go. Bradley raised a generation of his own. And uh, they believed in him and they believed in that. And they was honest in their opinion. You can't hold it agin 'em, they didn't know any better. And uh, so uh, then you had a few fellers that was hired to do and knowed better, but didn't care--they done it for the money. The people that lived here, it was their affair. And I couldn't see these people getting hired from over yonder somewhere to work a few days for a big price to come and carry guns and push somebody around that belongs here and lives here and been here all their life. And Charles Ray was one of them kind of people. And I hope he hears this because I don't like that feller and I never did, and I never will. And I don't know him. About the most I ever got to Charles Ray was down by the road, he drove by in a car. But a man that will hire his gun out for hire is not much of a human. He don't have no decency about him. And I'd tell him that face to face, just as quick as I'd tell you. Because what I do I believe in. I've tried to be an honest man all my life. And I tried to tell the truth about things, something I don't want to tell, I don't tell you. I ain't gonna lie to you about it. And uh, I owe no man. And I never did, other than when I bought this place. I owed the bank for four months. And I worked her out in four months and give it to 'em. I just stayed at my work 'til I got it paid. And [inaudible] can't hire me to do. I, I've been that way, I've lived that way. I'm not a religious feller but I believe in religion. But I'm not a man that would lie about it and I would have fought for one of them fellers as quick as I'd fought him, if he'd been right about it. But there was wrong and money was a doing it and they was all running over these people and running over people that worked up there. Gandy was a regular slave driver. And uh, he used that cruelly on people because he had the advantage of 'em. But there was no way. . . . This thing was done for the county as much or more so, than it was for Widen. There was no way that you could get any hope to do anything on the count of Bradley's money because it was everywhere.

You told me a story once, oh, a couple days ago, about Gandy and Newman and a car that held [inaudible] And you said this car holds [inaudible]

That wasn't me. You've got me confused with somebody else.

I know it was you. You said that they took [inaudible] Gandy took 'em out and said, "Now, this car holds two ton." And the loader replied, "Which corner do I put it in?" and got fired on the spot. But that was you.

No, no, wasn't me, uh-huh, because see, I didn't work in the mines. No, you've got me confused with somebody else.

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Okay. I'll tell you what, sir, we'll get. . . if you have any notes, just take 'em down and I'll drop back by in a week or so and we'll go over it again.

Yeah, well, it's impossible to think of everything at once and tell it all just like it happened, because you can't do that. Your mind can't. . . your mind isn't that good. The only thing is if you have a question, come back and ask me. I'll tell you the best I know about it.

Okay, sir, I sure will.

END OF INTERVIEW



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Norman D Munsey
(Signature - Witness)

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Text in regular bold print is questions/comments by interviewer, N.D. Munsey. Text in italics is answers/comments by interviewee, Virgle Nelson.

Mr. Nelson, would you state your full name, please, sir?

Virgle Nelson.

No middle initial?

E.

Virgle E. Nelson. (Mmm-hmm) You were born when and where, sir?

I was born in July the 25th, 1922. I was on the hill from what they called Hamricks Run at the time. Upon on Buffalo.

Hamricks Run?

Mmm-hmm.

And where did you go to school, sir?

I went to school at Adiar and I went to school at Gross Hill up on Dog Run.

Okay sir. After you. . .you told me earlier that you'd graduated from high school. After you graduated from high school. . .

No, I didn't graduate. (You didn't graduate?) I only got to fifth grade. (You went to the fifth grade?) Yeah.

What did you do after you got out of school?

I worked for Elk River Coal Lumber Company. I worked [inaudible] hauled cross ties off the [inaudible] track up there Avokie and Brush Bottom and I was about 12 years old at the time.

Good Lord! Did you work for them until you went in the service?

Until I went in the service. Then after I'd done that, I hauled coal to a steam shovel and after I done that, I worked on the railroad 'til I went in the service.

That's all for Elk River Coal?

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Elk River Lumber. Now, wait a minute. The Buffalo Creek and Gauley see on the lower end. The upper end was Elk River Coal and Lumber Company.

So you worked for both?

I worked for both. But I worked for Buffalo Creek and Gauley Railroad first. All this was before then.

Okay. And where did you live, at the time you were working, before you went in the service?

I lived with my parents where I was born. We owned a farm. I believe maybe about as well as I can remember, about 80 to 100 acres, something like that.

Where did you live at after you got back from the military service?

Well, uh, the day I went to service, my dad moved to a place that he lives now over here at the top of Dundon Hill. He bought that place. And I come back home there, of course, and lived with my parents awhile. I was wounded in service and I wasn't able to go to work for a long time. And uh, so uh, when I got so I thought I could stand work, my dad was foreman on the yard at Widen, section foreman.

What was your father's name, sir?

Herman Nelson. And he talked to Perkins, George Perkins, that was the tippie foreman at the time. And he told my dad to tell me to come on up. He gave me a job. And I went to Widen after I got back. That was '45, I believe. I can't be sure about dates 'cause sometimes you get to studying about it and it's another day there. But anyway, I went up there and he give me job picking slate on the tippie.

What did that... what did that job entail? What was it like?

Oh, well, it was work. And uh, it was just picking slate. You see, the coal run off the hill on a belt, and then they run it across these screens and they had a table that six men worked at. And they picked slate out of lump coal, and uh, as it come by. It was hand picked, the lump coal was, you see. The other coal, they run it through a washer.

Can you remember what kind of pay you got back then?

I was studying about that today, and I believe that we got \$4 for 8 hours, I think's what we got at that time.

That was picking slate?

Yeah. I believe we got \$4 for 8 hours, is what we got at that time.

What were you getting in 1952?

In '52 I got \$16. . . a little bit better than \$16 for 8 hours.

Was that net or gross? Was that take home or. . .?

No, of course, that was what I made, your income tax and your company expense and all that had to come out of that.

What, other than income tax, came out of it, that the company'd take out?

Well, the company took out hospitalization, I believe was around \$2. And uh, then they had a miscellaneous that they took out, that I believe was maybe fifty cents or a dollar, something like that. But it was just miscellaneous. I don't know what it went for. Then, of course, they had a so-called league up there. Wasn't nothing to it. It was just a so-called thing.

What do you mean, league?

League. That was an organization that they had for the men, they said, you know. But all the time I worked there, 7 year after I come back from the Army, and I never knowed of or went to a meeting during all that time.

Was it a union?

Well, it was a, it was constructed for that purpose, I think. But I, uh, I know that you never could find out anything about it. I couldn't. I know one time Lanny Facemore was the president of it, supposed to be. And he went to Gandy and asked him about having a league meeting and Gandy told him, "When a dog's asleep, just let it sleep." That's the words he told him.

Okay. Did you, you didn't work in the mine, did you, sir?

No, I worked outside on the tipple.

I won't ask you any questions on mine safety then, since you worked outside. They had pretty complete school system at Widen, didn't they?

Well, I never went to school up there. But as far as I know they did. Bradley built his own system of whatever was on his property was Bradley's, and he arranged it to suit hisself. If he

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

didn't like a teacher, he got rid of that teacher. If he wanted a school house, he built a school house. Now, as far as I know, I've heard, now this is just a rumor now. I don't know this to be a fact. Because I didn't have to no reason to finger in to that end of it. But they tell me that he had built a school house and get it off on his taxes. I don't know whether that happened or not for sure. That's just heresy.

Was there a police force in Widen?

None other than the constable, only during strikes.

How was. . .any kind of discipline or safety contained in a town of upwards of 5500?

Well, after Gandy come there, Gandy took care of that hisself by . . .men would go off and get drunk or something, say. I could name names that done this very thing, but I don't want to do that. And they'd come back to work and he'd hear about 'em being over at this beer joint at [inaudible] or over at Berts River drunk a fighting, Gandy'd lay 'em off 4 or 5 days or a week, some of them 2 weeks. Gandy would give 'em 2 or 3 days or a week off from work, see, for being over at Berts River or over at [inaudible name] fighting or whatever they'd got into.

What if they continued doing this?

Well, he'd continue laying 'em off. And he was a master man that growled, [inaudible] around the men about things.

What about social life in Widen? What was there to do there?

That I didn't fool with too much. Now, I lived in Widen awhile after I was first married. And I lived up in Brush Fence. They had 2 story houses and they'd rent you a half a house, you know. And uh, I lived in one of them awhile. And I lived by a Clark, Pino Clark. That's about all I knowed about him, because that's about all I wanted to know about him. And uh, him and his wife would get into fights and everything else, just didn't [inaudible] But anyway, that was their business. And I lived up there a little while. I don't know just how long. And I built me a house out on my dad's place and moved out there, before I bought this place here.

How much did he cost you to live in half a community and half a company house?

I just don't know what the rent was. But the rent wasn't very much.

Did they have churches in Widen? Or did you. . . .

As far as I know they did. I believe they did, yeah. I never went to church in Widen, but I believe they did. I couldn't swear they did have, but I think they did, yeah.

Ball team?

Yeah, had a ball team. Yeah, knowed about that. Yeah.

YMCA?

Yeah. Well, now, the YMCA was there for a little while. But they. . . finally put-, the old store burnt down down there and they put the store up there in the Y.

Okay. I think. . . could you tell me some more about the Employees League of Widen Miners? How was it organized?

Well, you see, I wasn't there during the time they organized it.

Let's put it this way. How was it set up?

I don't think anybody ever knowed. Only thing I knowed about it was, and the only thing that was ever explained to me about it was they had a league there and they'd hold fifty cents dues off of you a month, and that's all I ever knowed about it. And uh, you see, you didn't check on stuff like that. If you did, you didn't work for Bradley very long, you didn't stay there.

How were the members selected to the governing committee?

I don't think anybody could tell you how it was done. It was just appointed by Gandy. It's just strictly my own theory. [inaudible] or whoever the lieutenant was at the time.

How were grievances handled?

Well, just like I told you awhile ago. By Gandy. Gandy was the main man.

Could you go to Facemyer, say I have a grievance?

No, you might go say that. But that's as far as it went.

It uh, when you were living and working, this was prior to 1952, living and working in Widen, did you notice any UMW organizing attempts?

No, no. Now, they's been, people have been mislead about that all the way. I am one of the fellars that went to the trouble to talk to Bill Blizzard to get support in that strike.

When did you do that?

That was during the first part of the strike. Now when the strike first come out, see, here's the thing about it. They was fathers and sons against one another. And [interruption] during that strike, you see, all the working men that was at Widen at the time I believe it was 615 men come out on this strike.

Where did you get that figure?

Of course, the bosses, we couldn't-, we had that figure on our, on our uh, list. And the bosses, of course, they couldn't come out on strike. They had-, they was company men, you know. But anyway, they was fathers and sons and so on. And finally, after when they come out on strike, I come home, I stayed at home two weeks. And I was trying to decide what to do, whether to work or whether or not to work. I knowed all these men. They was good neighbors of mine, good friends of mine. And I just finally decided that I couldn't see going working against a man that was trying to get the benefits that I wanted and everybody else wanted, as far as that was concerned, for his family and hisself.

Before we get too far above, I'd like to back up and. . . What incident caused the walkout on September 20th?

It wasn't no one incident that casued it. It was a whole group of things that caused it. And a lot of 'em was Gandy's fault. And uh, I think these boys went to the Army and they found out there was another world besides Bradley's world. You wouldn't have no idea how Bradley run his world, without you would have been part of it. See, I was raised as one of them people to start with. And uh, for instance now. Here is one thing. Like when I got married and I went to Widen to rent me a house, Gandy calls me in the office. He says, "Now, here Nelson, we've got furniture and we've got stuff to sell up here at the company store to set you up into housekeeping. If you're gonna work for us, you're gonna work for the company." Well, I never said nothing. I knowed if I said airy thing right then I'd get fired. But I just thought "Now, oh, boy, I work for my money and I give you an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. And when I get it I'm gonna spend it to where I get good and ready." Of course, you couldn't say that.

Where did . . .when did Gandy come to Widen?

I'd been there about 2 or 3 weeks when Gandy come there, I think. Or something. Maybe a little longer than that. But I just don't remember the dates. You know, it'd be impossible for me to remember. I know the first time I ever seen Gandy I was [inaudible] on the tippie up there. And the tippie broke down and Gandy come up there on the tippie. That's the first time I ever seen him. Some of 'em told me that's who he was.

What year, about what year was that?

Well, I'd say it was in the last part of '45 or '46.

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

When was he made general manager or whatever. . . .?

I guess he was from the time he come there, as far as I know.

Did uh, was Gandy promoted over Ad Wilson?

Gandy was the superintendent. He was the boss over all of 'em. Ad Wilson and Garland Craft, too.

Well, a rumor I heard that Ad Wilson was passed over for the superintendent's job.

By Gandy, but Gandy was hired on top. Gandy never worked up to his job atall. See, Garland Craft done that. Wilson worked up to what they got. But there's a thing about Garland Craft that I never hear mentioned any or much, and nothing's said about it during this strike and stuff. Garland Craft was a man that took care of his own business. And he didn't mettle in everybody's affairs. I'd have to say that for Garland. I never heard Garland's name misused at no time.

Well, maybe it wasn't Gandy. Maybe it was Beatty.

Beatty come there after Gandy. A right smart while after Gandy. I think maybe Gandy had something to do with getting Beatty.

Was Beatty given a job over Ad Wilson? Was that one of the reasons for the strike?

Well, you see, uh, no, unh-huh, no, I don't think so. Beatty was a slave driver. And he was a hard man to work for.

What do you mean, a hard man?

A hard man. A lot of people had disagreements with him about the job, about the way he done it and about what he done and the mistreatment that he give 'em.

Be specific. . . can you be more specific?

Well, for instance, of course, this is getting a way up in the thing. But they had a Hamrick boy, Jack Hamrick worked there. And he was a young man and they, for some reason or the other, this is inside. I didn't have no first-hand information about this, other than what. . . Abner Hamrick was a sheriff at the time. And he was working at Widen. And uh, he uh, they wanted to get rid of Jack, and they had to do it in a way that they didn't get in trouble over it, you see. So they had a place that was falling in. They told him to go in there and load coal or to get his pay.

It wasn't over a new machine?

Now, I don't know nothing about that now. Now I don't know what it was. But that was, Abner told me that hisself. I don't believe Abner lied. So the tactics of that kind, there was a lot of stuff pulled off, nobody knowed nothing about 'em, only the feller it was pulled on. Because when a man got fired, he left Widen and left the company's houses and if. . . then they got rid of you.

How did the medical benefits or lack of or. . . ?

Well, I can give you a for instance on that. My wife got sick. And we didn't know what was wrong with her. She was passing out and take dizzy spells and stuff. And she went over here to Dr. Bergman at Clay. And Dr. Bergman told her, asked her if I didn't work at Widen. Yeah. Well, he said, "The thing for you to do is, I'll write up what's wrong with you here and you can take it up to the company doctor." Well, he didn't know about that, I think. But anyway, said, "You can take it to the hospital and get tests run on you so we can find out what's wrong with you, so we'll know what to do with you." So I got the paper he wrote up for my wife and took it up to the company doctor. And uh, they had a Frenchman up there--I can't think of his name. You couldn't understand anything he said, hardly. And I asked him if he'd sign that so I could take my wife to the hospital. In which we paid hospitalization, you see. And uh, he began to give me an argument and said he wouldn't sign it without I'd bring her to her and put what he knowed on it. And I had no confidence in no woman at all. I knowed of him giving a baby a shot up there and in a day or so it died. I don't know whether that's what done it or not. But a lot of people thought that's what done it. And uh, so I told him I wouldn't bring her up there and that I wouldn't let him doctor my dog. I said, "I think you're just a horse doctor and I wouldn't let you doctor my dog!" He got mad and run to old Gandy about it. And Gandy called me in the office and told me that I called the doctor a horse doctor. And I told him, "No, I called him a damned old horse doctor!"

You called him a what old horse doctor?

A damned old-, god-damned old horse doctor. And I wouldn't bring my dog to him. That's my opinion of him. I just didn't think he was capable of doctoring anybody. And Gandy begin to tell me then that there wasn't nothing wrong with my wife, like as if he was a doctor. And then he began to tell about one of her sisters, who was fat and that type of thing. So I just left. I knowed me and Gandy wasn't going to agree on that. And if you worked there, you agreed with Gandy. And I left before I disagreed in a way that he might not like it.

What about the retirement fund? Did you have any complaints over that?

I, of course, I didn't retire. And I had no experience in retirement, other than we were supposed to have a retirement fund they paid into. But I've heard several fellers tell tell about the retirement. And some of 'em drawed a hundred dollars a month, I think, from that retirement,

that did retire. But of course, when the company quit, the retiremeretirement quit, you know. And I think most people knowed that was what happened. And if they wanted to get rid of you a year before they retired, or two years before you retired, they could do it and you wouldn't get nothing, see. And they done things like that. A lot of these names I can't think of, because it's been too long.

It's not important. A lot's just a matter of record anyway. Here's a question. How did you get paid? By check, cash or what?

We got paid by check.

When you cashed it in Widen, did you get cash or script?

No, you. . .they had a bank in Widen. You could take your check to the bank and get cash for it. But there's an awful lot of people that worked for Bradley that never drewed a check. Because they would go to the store and buy stuff until they overrun their work. Or, they would go to the store, some of them, this was most usually found in people that got drunk and drunk a lot of beer and whiskey and stuff and a lot of roaming around, you know. They would go to the store and draw script, they would call it. They had a money called script. And they had fifty cents and a quarter and a dollar and had a star with a hole punched in it, in the shape of a star. And they'd take that from the store when they'd draw the script. They had a card they'd put down in there, stamp \$5 or \$10 or whatever you drawed, on the card. Well, you'd take this script and go to the bank and they'd give you cash for that, but they discounted ten cents on the dollar. Trade it to you for the script, see. And that way they could take that script to the bank and get money, ten cents on the dollar, they'd pay more, you know, what it was. And then uh, they could have a little money that way. But I heard a many of time, many a time I've been around the store before now, the company store, and they'd tell 'em "Now, you're gonna have to wait til you work another day before you can get any script." Or, "You're gonna have to wait till you work another day before you get any groceries, see." And of course, we've got them people all over the world, overspending their budget, you know. I never drawed any script in my life.

What did it say on the script?

Well, Elk River Coal & Lumber Company. And some of it said, the older script, said, In Bradley We Trust.

Did you ever see any of that?

That older? Yeah, a long time ago. Yeah.

Now, after the miners walked out on the 20th of September, 1952, you said that after you decided to stay out on strike, you were one of those that went to see Bill Blizzard.

Yeah.

Who are some of the others? Do you remember?

I don't just remember who exactly all it was. But there was several of us went down there. Now, the union had no part in it at all. And that's the thing that's been mislead through the trials and everything else. You see, they had to blame somebody. And uh, the union had had no part in it at all, in no way. It was strictly the men that worked there. And me and Darrell Douglas and several other people--there was 10 or 12 of us, maybe more than that--I don't know. I didn't count them. And a lot of them I forgot. And we went down and went to Bill Blizzard's office, District 17, went in to talk to him. And Bill Blizzard himself told us, he said, "Boys, you've got a tough nut to crack there." And he said, "Now, I won't promise you anything." But he said, "I'll see what I can do." And we went down there for support. Because some of these men, after 4 or 5 weeks or a month, had begin to get hard up. They was needing something to eat, needing some clothes, needing food, needing some way to go, you know. Well, there was some of 'em that did starve out, went back and got a job and worked for Bradley's. [inaudible] but the ones they let come back. But during that time and in the first part of it, these people, Bradley's people, got out and hired everybody they could for \$35 a day for 8 hours to come up there and guard and carry guns and stuff. And uh, at that time, \$35 a day was a lot of money.

Did you ever see a letter signed by Bill Blizzard that was reportedly carried around by 2 unnamed men, pickets saying that \$200,00 was ear-marked to support the strike?

No, no, no, not at no time. Now I think I knowed about that strike as much as anybody.

Had you ever heard that story?

No, never heard that story, either. That's a makeup.

Were there any. . . did Blizzard help you by sending-, organizing assistance up?

No, no sir! Now, that's another thing that's a makeup.

Was Ed Hecklebeck ever around?

That was a man that did come up there from the union and told these men what they could expect if they got a union and how it would be if they got a union. That's what he amounted to. Now, you was talking about funds. Now, I never did tell this before, I don't think. A few people knowed about it. But the way we got funds to buy what we had to eat with and so on, now they, I don't know all about it. But me and another man--I'd rather not mention his name--I know him real well. We went to Coal River, we went to Paint Creek, we went to Cabin Creek, we went to every union local in this part of the country. And these, told the men our situation and what it

was about. And they give us money to bring back to buy groceries with. Now this stuff that Bradley fixed up about the union a doing this and the union a doing that, that's just a bunch of buck. Now, the only thing that Bill Blizzard promised us that they would do, he said, "Now, if you boys "stays with your pig," and, and you need it, we will give you lawyers to represent you in court, if you need it.

Stay with your what?

"Stay with your pig," he says. You know what he meant by that. That was to stay with the strike. And he says, "We'll give you lawyers to represent you, if you need it." Now, that's the only thing that Bill Blizzard promised anybody.

Did a man named Enoch Foley ever show up on the picket line?

Foley, Jim Foley.

E. H.

I don't know. They called him Jim. But, he never amounted to nothing. He come up there and talked a little bit about how we was gonna live and how hard times we was gonna have. They never silver-coated nothing. They never sugar-coated nothing. They just put it to 'em just the way it was. And uh, and uh, then the papers came out with all this union stuff that'd done this and that and the other. That there was the biggest lie that was ever wrote. And Bradley and them had big tales fixed up. They done that to [inaudible] keep the thing a going, you know. And a lot of Bradley's men, a lot of the violence and stuff that was accused onto everybody, was caused by them \$35 a day men so they could keep their job; that's just exactly why. Yeah.

It uh. . . let's put it this way. There apparently were a lot of people showed up on the picket line quite often. Most were local people that didn't, had never worked for Elk River Coal Company.

Yeah, that's right, that's a hundred percent right. And what they was, was just drunks and bums that didn't have no where else to go and they come up to bum something to eat, where we'd went and bummed the money off these other men like Cabin Creek and up in Paint Creek and Coal River and places, and just hang around to get something to eat. I could name you some of them, but I don't want to without I have to.

It's not necessary. Why. . . why didn't you run 'em off? Well, you just don't up and run somebody off from nowhere, I don't think.

Did they create any disturbances, did they call names, throw rocks?

Well, no, not that I know of. I couldn't say that. I don't know that they did. One of them took fits, I know, and liked to scared us all to death. But uh, a whole lot of this, a whole lot and the biggest majority of this so-called violence that went on on the picket lines was fiction.

END OF SIDE 1 - TAPE 1 - BEGIN SIDE 2 - TAPE 1

Where were the picket lines first set up, Mr. Nelson?

Uh, picket lines really wasn't set up. Now, you see, where you get into, people. . . they had to have, had to make out like we was an organization of some kind and had everything organized and so on, to do these things, in order to get the courts to listen to them and so on, and in order to get. . . . That was what people like Charles Ray was hired for, to do them things. And he done a good job. To start with, they come out up there and uh, Gandy talked to them and he promised them this, that and the other to get 'em to go back to work. Well, the men did go back to work and they worked, I think, maybe a week or so, 2 or 3 days or a week, if I can remember. Well, they didn't get nothing that he promised them, so they come back out again.

What did he promise them? Do you recall?

Oh, he was gonna fix everything up that they wanted, yeah. Had a meeting up at uh, at the ball park up above Widen and he got up on a truck or something there and he told them that he'd see that this was done and that was done and so on. And. . . but anyway, it wound up he didn't do nothing, just back to the same thing again. And they come out again. Well, when they come out that time, these fellers went to punching them guns around at 'em, tell 'em how they were gonna shoot 'em and stuff.

Who are these fellers?

Well, Ronald Tolbert was one of them and Darrell Woods was one of them, and Chilton Wilson was one of them and a lot of them done that. I could name you a lot. Dean Gray and I don't know, there was a lot of them. And they went to punching them guns around. They gonna shoot this fellow and that one and the other. And then they went to hollering that union stuff, you know. Union's didn't have nothing in it. It was just the men that worked at Widen. They was wanting someone to listen to their tale. They was wanting somebody to do something about it, you know. Have some way of reasoning with the company, in other words.

There was one case where the younger miners, Dennis Zirkle and Doyle Wagner and some others I don't know, about seven of them, ran for election to fill a vacancy on the miners league.

I didn't know about that.

You remember that?

I didn't know nothing about that, no. No, no, no. I didn't know about it at all. But then they forced them out of Widen, you know. So the men just went as far as they forced them. They forced them up the top of the hill.

How did they force them up to the top of the hill?

Well, with these guns that I was talking about, see. Punching the guns at 'em and tell them how they were gonna shoot 'em and I don't know what all. Well, this was a bunch of farmers, working men, people that knowed all this. But I'm getting ahead of my story because a lot of these like Byrne Wilson and that type person, worked for Bradley and never done nothing. He went to the mines and got his pay like he was a working man. And you couldn't catch Byrne a working at nothing. Well, there was Vess Mullins, which was a legislature man that worked there. And he never done nothing that I ever seen him a doing. And I said, "What are you supposed to be doing, Vess?" He was legislature man, elected from the county. "Oh," he said, "I hand out light bulbs." And he hung around the electric shop up there. And I don't know if he ever did hand out one or not. I never did catch him at it. And uh, so uh. . . then he had a lot of them kind of people that paid, was supposed to be working men that didn't do nothing. They went out and got their pay and their check. But when these crisis came up, like the men coming out on a strike or something, then their job started, you see.

Okay. The pickets moved back to the top of [inaudible]

Up to the top of the hill, yeah.

About, that's about 2 weeks after the strike started? Or about a week?

Well, I'd say approximately, the 2nd time they come out, see. The first time they came out they went back to work. Was gonna work if he'd do something. But the 2nd time then I don't think it was much more than 2 or 3 days when they came out, til they moved out to the top of the hill. Now I don't know about these dates. Because you just don't remember things like that, or I don't. And uh, the first thing that I knowed though, was that I come home and stayed about 2 weeks before I went back, trying to make up my mind. I wanted to know what I was gonna do. I'd been raised a Bradley boy and I didn't know nothing else but that. And uh, that's talking about yourself. But I'm just putting it like it is. And uh, I went up to the top of the hill. And they'd drove 'em out of there while I was at home, see. And they was telling me about 'em using guns on 'em and threatening them, and how Byrne Wilson was carrying on and jumping up and down and cussing them and so on and so forth. And 2 or 3 or 4 other fellers was down in there. Well, of course, they was getting paid for that, they'd do a good job of it, you know. And all these men that was out there a striking was doing it on their own. They was. . . wasn't getting paid nothing by nobody, in no way. And uh, I know I was up there that evening. Here come

Ronald Tolbert and Dean Gray and some of them Wood's, maybe Don and Darrell, I don't know. And a lot of other people from down in there. I didn't know 'em all. In a car. A whole car full of 'em. There was three fellows to the seat. All of them had pistols. Big old pistols, .38 specials, looked to me like. They drove up there and begin to call these pickets names and stuff like that, telling you, "Yes, you, Goddamn, you," stuff like that. Well, they started sticking their guns out the windows and pointing them at 'em, you know. And uh, so in a little bit, these pickets kept ganging around the car, coming up closer. You could tell they didn't like it. They was calling 'em, you know, they wasn't saying nothing to none of them. And just now that car just flipped up on its back right in the road. These fellers came out of there squalling over the hill and run down into the woods and run off yonder and run this a way and that way and guns flying all over the road. And uh, some of them, as they run through the woods, got hit in the back with a rock and stuff like that. I seen a lot of this happen. I don't know who done any of it, though.

Do you have a good right arm?

And uh, no, not a very good one. And so, they all run off and went back to Bradley. Well, then is when they went and got old Charles Ray, hired gunman. And they went and got a court order and got all these thugs in there then. They began to getting 'em in, bringing them in. Well, then the first thing I-, last count on them I had there was seventeen of them. Then they had Ray and a bunch of other people in there that I didn't know nothing about it. Didn't want to know nothing about him, because that's Ray's own business. And Ray didn't have nothing in that. That was between Bradley's people and Bradley. And he lived off over yonder at Gandyville or somewhere the other side of Spencer, I hear. And he had to be a hired gun in order to come in there and do that, you see. And a man who'll hire out to kill somebody with a gun, ain't much [inaudible] to him. I don't care who he is.

What do you know about the stopping of the two federal probation officers?

I don't know nothing about it. Don't know a thing in the world about that.

Were you on the line where. . .

Not that I know of. Anybody that'd stop. . . . A lot of the stopping was done, was done in this way. Them people'd come up there and go to cussing them boys and calling them bad names. They was good people. They was farmers, most of them, like myself. They'd been raised here. They was honest people. And it's like Roscoe Bailes. Roscoe told 'em he shot into that convoy because he was a religious man, and he thought he ought to tell the truth about it. Well, they was forty-seven people there and there wasn't nobody admitted to shooting into that convoy but Roscoe. And Roscoe's the feller that got stuck with it. He was the only feller that would admit it, that he shot into that convoy.

Were there any women on the picket line up there?

Yeah, a lot of times. There was men that'd bring their wives with them and sometimes their kids with them. Yeah.

I was thinking about Mary Crookshanks.

Well, Mary Crookshanks was, I believe she was John Crookshanks wife, I believe was his name. I'm not sure about that. But anyway, Mary Crookshanks was up there. Mary was a, was an old time woman, that's all she was. She believed in what she was doing and she stood up for what she believed. And I respected her for that.

Did you see the sheriff or his dep-, regular deputies up there at any time?

Yeah.

What did they do when they were there?

Well, at one time, well, I'm getting a way ahead of myself now. You see, we had. . . (you had two sheriffs) when this first started, Abner Hamrick was the sheriff (No) wasn't it? (Sheriff Wilson) oh, yeah, Red Wilson. Yeah. Red was the sheriff. Red was a company man. When it first started, Red guarded people that would come up there and let 'em sneak 'em over there at Dundon and put 'em on a train so they wouldn't have to go past the pickets, you see. Because these pickets did holler at 'em and call them scabs and stuff, you know. And they'd sneak over there and get on the train and they'd send 'em up Widen and they'd stay in Widen and work up there, you know. And Bradley'd pay 'em \$35 a day if they would guard for him, [inaudible] punch it out with them pickets and call them bad names. See, what the idey was, was to get these pickets to do something so they'd get the law on 'em.

Pickets didn't holler bad names back?

They did, yes, sir. You go to putting a bunch of men out here and calling them all kinds of bad names then they're gonna holler back at you, ain't they?

How about stopping cars? Did you see cars stopped?

As far as a car being stopped, I don't believe that tale at all. Because there was never a time that I ever seen a car go through there and I was there a lot, that he couldn't have drove on, went on about his affairs. At no time. Now there was some cars come up there and stopped, just like I told you about them guards. They sent 'em up there for that reason. So they could get more for these pickets, so they could get court orders and get the judge to order them not to do this and the other, you know. And they used it for that purpose. And then they'd take their men

and go for witnesses. Like when they tried me for the Red Man's Act. They had the same men on the jury, on the grand jury, that was on my jury, company men. . . see. Not all of them now. On the petit jury. But some of them.

Did you

And so, now that's how fair it was. And this thing of the pickets done this, the pickets done that, every petition. . . . Now, I admit, the pickets was goaded into doing some things that may have not been right. But I'd say that everything they done, they was goaded into it by these thugs that he hired. Now they was hired for that reason and that's what they done.

Did you see the state police up there in the early part of the strike?

I seen the state police up there a lot of times. Now, we had Sam Whitman. I have no other idey-, now, I can't prove this. But I know that Sam was paid by Bradley. The things that Sam done. Sam would get drunk, I seen him a drinking whiskey on the job. State police don't do things like that. If they're the right kind of state police.

Did the crowd or a bunch of people--crowds a bad word--did they pick up-, back into a state police car one time?

Not that I know of. I don't know of nothing like that. But uh, this, this uh, is a hard thing to thing to think about, all the happenings that went on until it, the way it is. Because you can't remember all that stuff. And uh, that's like the Richard Nichols deal. That never was brought out just the way it was. Richard through his farm down there to clean out his springs so his cattle could have water to drink. . . on his own place. And Johnny Johnson lived on Richard's place in Richard's house.

The house that Richard lived in at the time?

No, Richard didn't live in that house. Johnny Johnson lived in a house that was on this place that he inherited it from his dad when his dad died. And uh, Johnny shot Richard and killed him. The state police picked Johnny up and Johnny admitted shooting Richard and killing him. Well, now, here's another thing that happened. When after the state police caught him and brought him down to jail, you see, Junior Kuhn's was sheriff at the time. Well, the sheriff goes over there and goes in Johnny's house without a warrant and that throwed the whole business away. Of course, at the same time, this Berry from up here at Sutton was Johnny's lawyer. And from all I could find out, now, it's just like paying them thugs up there. The lawyer's tried to find out if them, where them fellers was getting their money, these hired guns. And they could never find out how they was getting paid or where they was getting their money at. The only thing they could get out of 'em was that they wasn't getting no money. They was working for nothing. That's all they could get out of 'em. But, we did find out to our satisfaction, that Bradley had

paid Johnny Johnson's lawyer for defending him in court. Well, Bradley had no connections to Johnny Johnson whatsoever. Until the strike. And of course, we come to the conclusion that Bradley had hired Johnny to shoot Richard. And my dad was the first feller that found Richard after he was shot.

In the newspaper you read about hillside pillboxes.

Now that's, no, that's

I don't know whether they refer to the pickets or whether they refer to positions around the company's installation.

Well, not the company had men around these bridges and places and had built them a pillbox out of cross ties, you know. That guard, so-called guard, you know, and sometimes they'd take spells shooting and they'd just shoot up a storm around there, you know. I don't know what they was shooting at. But one time I went to Widen and there was a bunch of them guards over there in that mine, on Rock Camp, in the entrance there. They went to shooting at me as I went up the road in my truck. And they shot at me as long as they could see me. And I went on up on the hill and reported it to the state police. I didn't know there was state police up there. They had different ones. And I told them they was shooting at me over there. And he said, "Well, by God, you better just stay away from there." And I was just going up the road. I was on the hard road.

Do you know anything about the bridges being blown?

No, the only thing I know about that is what I've read about in the paper. And uh, I believe half of that was done by them guards, to keep their job a guarding.

How about the power station getting blown?

I don't know nothing about that either. Other than just what I read about it. And I believe that, I actually believe that half of that stuff or more. . . . I'm not a clearing the pickets of it. They could have done some of it, maybe. But I would say that half or more of it was done by their own people, so they could keep their jobs \$35 a day guarding. Then \$35 for eight hours was a lot of money.

Do you know anything about the Mack rail bus being stopped?

Well, now you're talking about, they called it the Jitney bus. (That's right) Motor B. Yeah. Yeah, that was a fixed thing, and we fell right into it. That, I don't know. Now I didn't know nothing about none of it, only we went up to Swandale. And we was fooling around there, just talking and we was talking about the strike and what we was gonna do to, you know, to live and so on and so forth. A bunch of us was just sitting around there talking. There was a bunch of

pickets, a bunch of people was on picket line. But we wasn't there for no reason whatsoever that we knowed about. We met there and went to stop and talk to one another, just like anybody would. Well, for some reason or the other, this outfit had found out that we was down there. Well, just in a little bit here comes this motor down the road. Well, I'd worked for the company on the line, I'd worked on the railroad all my life. I knowed everybody that worked for the company about, or a lot of them. And it stopped right above us and went to raking the gears on it and punching and a raking around. And of course, naturally we went up there to see what was going on or what it was, or just what was going on. But later on we found out after that, that they'd sent these men down there to shoot some of us and cause a big fight so they could get warrants for us and put us in jail to get rid of us. That's what they said they done it for. So when we got up there, went up to the motor and the same people just scrounging around and a grabbing and a thumping around and me and Jack Lanham and my brother-in-law, Ernest Bailey and oh, several of us there. We got up on there and we knowed them people. And here they was trying to get their gun loaded so they could shoot us. Had shells scattered all over the floor. There was three or four pistols laying in the floor. And they seen us come in, they acted like it scared 'em to death, and they throwed their guns down and scattered their shells all over the floor. So Scott Williams was on there. And that's what they got [inaudible] hitting Scott. Scott hit at me and when he hit at me, I busted him right in the kisser. And whenever he straightened up a little bit, I busted him another time or two. I knocked him outside and so, Sterling Nelson jumped off the motor and run off. And I don't know where he went to. But the next day--I'll tell this while I think of it--my dad was working on the railroad at that time down there at Dundon; he was section foreman. And he said as soon as I went out to work, here comes Sterling down the road and his britches about all tore off of him and he uh, had been wading the creek, all the way from Swandale into Dundon. Pop says to him, he says, "Sterling, what's the matter with you?" "Why," he said, "them union fellers got after us, after us," and he said, "I jumped off that motor and I waded Buffalo plumb from Swandale down to here." And he said, "I'm just wore plumb out." And he said, "Every time I stopped I could hear them fellers a talking." Why, there wasn't nobody knowed where Sterling went to and didn't care. And uh, that's the way a lot of them tales was, they was just tales and told and there wasn't nothing in the world to it.

What about the train that was hit by shots? Allegedly hit by shots?

I don't, that's just heresy, as far as I know. I don't know. I couldn't tell you about it.

Okay. I know there were a lot of cars dynamited, barns burned. And this was on both sides.

Yeah. Somebody dynamited Richard Nichols's tractor. Before he got shot. And somebody, now, right here's a, uh, one morning we was up at the picket line. I was up there. Just now here come Buck Carte and oh, Buck Carte and one of the Woods'.

Is Buck Carte the one they call Buster?

Yeah, that's Buster. He was just a drunk, a no-good. And one of the Woods', but he was one of their thugs they hired up there, see. You could get any kind of a man to pick up a gun [inaudible] without he's a certain kind of a person. And that's what I said about Rafe coming over there sticking his nose into something that didn't concern him. They come up by the picket line and said "John Rader, your barn's on fire." John Rader was one of the pickets, and me and John was up there on the picket. Well, all right. Sure enough, they'd come from setting John's barn on fire. Then they went off and told that me, Virgle Nelson and John Rader, was playing poker in his barn and got it on fire. And we wasn't even down there. That was John Rader's own barn. And then my brother-in-law, Ernest Bailey, lived up there in a house, had to park his truck up this road. They come along one morning and shot it full of holes. And he knowed who done it. I don't know for sure. I just took his word for what he said. And uh, they was lots of them things happening. And lots of 'em. I do know the pickets might have done a few things that they shouldn't have done. But I think most of it was brought on by them thugs they hired, them guards they hired. They was mean men. They was people that didn't care for nothing. And they enjoyed doing them type things.

Things quieted down during the winter, quite a bit.

Well, you starve a feller long enough and like them pickets wasn't, they wasn't paid by nobody. They didn't have any money. They didn't have no way of living. They couldn't get no unemployment. You live fourteen months without any work, without any money coming in at all, you [inaudible] at a bad place.

How did you feed yourself?

Well, I was a little better off than the rest of 'em. I had a farm and had my cattle and my wife cans a lot of stuff. And we lived cheaper than most people. I know one time when the strike first started, the first two or three weeks or a month of it, Shorty Thompson was a man down here that lived down here below Macel. He come up there and told us, he said, "Now, I'm gonna have to go back to work. My family's a starvin', and I'm a starvin'." And he says, "Now, I'm gonna have to go back to work to get some food somewhere for my family." We went out between us and made enough money to bought him all the groceries he could get in his car. And after we done that, we had \$15 left over. And we give that to Shorty. And we come back home. The next day, Shorty went over at Dundon and Fred Wilson sneaked him over there and got him on the train, sent him to Widen and he went back to work a guardin', and come out the next day or two, a pointin' his gun at us and telling us how he was gonna shoot us. Yeah. Now, that's the truth about it. How many times have you seen stuff like that put in the paper?

Okay. On May the 5th, 1953, the camp was bulldozed. Do you remember. . . were you at the camp at that time?

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

I wasn't up there when they had the bulldozer up there. But the company men [inaudible] everything that was there, all but where I think they had a barrel or something there to build a fire in, to stand around.

Either the 5th or the 6th of May, there was an egg throwing incident up there. Were you on the line at that time?

No, uh-huh, no.

Then on the night of the 6th and 7th of May, they, the company ran two convoys past the cook shack at Dille.

Now, wait a minute, if we're gonna get into cook shack, we'll start at the first of it and then we'll know.

Okay. When did they set up the cook shack?

They set up the cook shack during the last, oh, I'd say it'd been going on for four or five months or longer before they set up the so-called cook shack, they called it. But now, what that was, was Dewey Triplett's garage. It was a cinder block garage. (I seen it) And they got, they went over there and some of them did, and fixed meals, you know, for somebody that was up on the picket line. And they'd fix 'em a meal; they'd go over there and eat their dinner or supper or whatever, if ever they was up there that long and they wanted to eat, they'd go over there and eat. That's all it was. And Dewey was on the strike, the same as the rest of us. Dewey was an awful good man, he believed in what he believed in and he was an honest man. I think if you'll check right down to the guts of the thing, all them fellers that was pickets that worked for Bradley at the time was farmers and honest citizens. People that paid taxes and was honest people. But, then we go on to where that incident happened at the cook shack. I was there.

Were you there all night?

I was there all night.

Were you there when the convoy went by?

I was there when the convoy went by.

There were two convoys. (Yeah) The first one. How many cars?

What happened there was they, these thugs that I've been talking about, come over there and told us people that was at Dewey Triplett's garage, that they was gonna run us out of there that night. "Goddamn you, we're gonna shoot you out of here!"

Virgle Nelson interview by N.D. Munsey, 29 July 1980.

Was that the first time they came there?

That was the first time they come over there.

How many cars?

Uh, I believe, I don't know whether I counted them or not. Seems to me like there was six or eight cars. Something of that. And they was, these guards that I was talking about was in these cars. And so uh, we didn't say anything. Oh, some of them might have smarted off a little bit. You always have a smart alec in every crowd, you know. So we got out of there and went to Summersville. Tried to get the sheriff over there, tried to talk to the judge. Couldn't get the judge to do nothing, couldn't get the sheriff to do nothing. Went to the state police, they wouldn't do nothing.

Why did you go to Summersville? That's still in Clay County.

Well, we couldn't get nothing done in Clay County. Summersville's in Nicholas County. And uh, we tried every law officer and every law that we knowed anything about, to find out about, to get 'em to do something. Because them guards were gonna come over there. They told us, and shoot us. That's what they said they was gonna come and do, at 4 o'clock the next morning. "We're gonna come and shoot you out of here." And a lot of cuss words with it. But that didn't mean nothing no how. So uh, all the law officers and everybody else wouldn't do nothing. They said they wouldn't do nothing. The judge wouldn't do nothing. So that was Dewey Triplett's property. He owned it. It belonged to him. And everybody always thought he had a right to defend his own, didn't he? And uh, so at 4 o'clock here they come down the hill.

I'd like to, before we get into that, are you sure there's only six or eight cars?

Well, that's just the best of my memory. Now, I don't-, I could be wrong about it. I wouldn't state no specific number, because I wouldn't want to do that because I... I didn't... I wasn't counting cars. Whenever somebody goes to shooting at you, by God, you ain't gonna count many cars.

I'm talking about the first convoy.

Well, the first convoy, uh, I wouldn't be sure about it. There was several of them; I don't know how many.

We won't beat that horse to death. Now the second convoy, where were you when it came by?

Well, let's don't go pin this down too tight. (Okay) Let's see now, let me think just a minute. I

was. . . when the second convoy came down by I was in Dewey Tanner's basement. (Dewey?) Not Dewey Tanner, Dewey Triplett's basement. Dewey Tanner's another feller. He didn't have nothing to do with it in no way. But uh, now, after, after the convoy went by, there was a lot of shootin', both sides was shootin' at each other, bullets was just a whizzing, both ways. And you see, now the company fixed that up so they said that there wasn't no shots fired from the convoy, see, I mean the company. And these, well, old Sam Whitman was over there. He had a hand in that. Sam was bought and paid for. And I can't prove that. But I know enough about it to know it's true, to satisfy myself, that's the only feller I had to satisfy, was myself. After the convoy went down, just a little bit, here there's a car that run over the hill right down here, right down below the cook shack. And it went into the holler down there. And Jack Dodrille jumped out of it and blew it all over him, hollering that somebody got killed, somebody killed. Well, Hell, you can't expect anything else if you were gonna shoot the feller and he was gonna shoot back at you. Somebody was gonna get hurt there directly, ain't they? Well, that's the way it always was where I was at. And uh. . . .

END OF SIDE 2 - TAPE 1 - BEGIN SIDE 1 - TAPE 2

. . . . Go ahead, sir.

Now, when they shoot at you, you usually expect to get shot back at. And that's usually what happens. Because Dewey Triplett owned the place. And he had invited us in there and was part of us. And Jack jumped out of the car, run up there along the road, you could see over there, blood all over. Said Charles Frame had got shot. Well, when they went down there, the state police come in just a jiffy. They was bound to be a sittin' just out of sight up there and just as quick as this happened, they ran down there. Well. . . .

Did you. . . now, this is important. Do you know, can you give me an estimate of how many minutes it was from the time of the shooting 'til the state police arrived.

I could give you an estimate of the best of my memory. And it couldn't have been more than three to four minutes. Couldn't have been more than that. And they ran right into that, arresting everybody that was in the cook shack. And so uh, when they got 'em all arrested and everything, they took me and I forgot who else it was in a car, the state police did.

Were you in the cook shack by this time?

Yeah. Yeah, I went down to the cook shack. It was just a jump from the house, you know, just as far as from here out to the road there. But anyway, a little bit farther than that maybe. But it wasn't but just a little piece. They took me and somebody else and I swear I can't think of who

that was.

It's in the report.

In the car. . . . And the state police took us down in the car. But all these other fellows, they had one of these [inaudible] trucks, company trucks. They backed it up there and they just drove 'em up in there like a bunch of cattle. And when they got 'em all in, they said, "Now run the Goddamned sons-of-bitches over the hill!" That's what they said.

Who said that?

State police and them guards. See, all these guards were ganged around there with their guns. After the state police come and we weren't going to fight the state police. We weren't going to fight nobody. "Run the Goddamned sons-of-bitches over the hill now." Well, anyway, they took these trucks loaded with these pickets down to jail.

Oh, for God sakes. Go ahead.

And they took 'em down to jail and put us all, had us all in that little old county jail down there. Then they go and get these company guards and places them around the jails with rifles and on top the jail like we was a bunch of criminals or something. You'd have to watch like a mad dog! And old [name inaudible] Bailes sat out in front of the jail with a gun, laughed at us and giggled at us and made light of us, you know.

I'm going to ask you a hard question. Don't answer it if you don't feel like it. Did you have a gun with you that night?

I wouldn't answer that question for nobody.

Okay. I had to answer it, you know that.

But I know that Roscoe Bailes didn't kill that feller. How I know it that's my affair.

Okay. That's all I'm ever gonna ask you.

I believe Jack Dodrill shot him in the back of the head. The man was shot in the back of the head. And he was looking over next to the cook shack and the bullet had entered in the back of his head. And there wasn't no way it could have done that if Jack hadn't shot him.

Okay. That's all I'm gonna ask on that. Okay, after you were put in jail. . . .

Well, that night here the state police come up there, took 'em out one at a time, was questioning

them, see. Well, they took me over to the courtroom and I went to talking to I believe his name was Williams, I believe was his name. Now, I'm not sure about these state police names, because I didn't know 'em that well at that time. And he talked to me awhile and I . . . I just talked to him like I would anybody. And uh, directly [inaudible name] came in. Bonar, he talked to me a little bit. I talked to him.

Pleasantly?

No, he wasn't a bit pleasant, neither one of them wasn't. And I just had to agree or disagree just to try to get along. Because I'd seen Dave Woods after they'd beat him up. And I figured that's what was coming. So just in a little bit they takes me in another room and Guthrie, there's a big police Guthrie, isn't there? Well, he was standing on one side of me and Williams on the other side of me and they sat me on a chair like this. And Guthrie, he laid his hand on one shoulder and Williams was on the other shoulder. Lieutenant Reger, who runs this here paleography machine, lie detector, he jerks my arm out there and says "I'm gonna put the paleography machine on you." I said, "No, I'm refusing it." "Don't matter a damn whether you do or not. I'm gonna put it on you anyhow." Bonar or Guthrie and Williams was standing on each side of me. They shoved down on my shoulders, you know, and took their black jack out in their hands. So he straps this machine on me. So he went to talking to me then, accusing me of doing everything that was done during the strike, all kinds of stuff, too many things to be . . . it ain't possible to remember. He sets his foot up between my legs on the chair, hit me up on the nose with his finger, called me a Goddamned lying son-of-a-bitch and I don't know what all. And I just told him right then, I said, "Well, now, I see that you boys is either figuring on beating me up, or beating the something out of me, whether it's the truth or lie or whatever, so I don't see whether I can help my situation by either lying to you or telling you the truth or anything else. Because it looks like I'm gonna get it anyhow." And uh, so he put in from 9 o'clock that night until 3 o'clock the next morning calling me a Goddamned lying sons-of-bitches. Cause Reger done that. And these two fellers are standing one on each side of me, holding my shoulder. Then which they had a black jack out in their hand, part of the time. Not all the time, but part of the time. And I come to the conclusion that they was gonna beat the hell out of me there. Had me scared to death! I tried my best not to show it. . . in any way. And I just sat there. And he just kept calling me liars and sons-of-bitches, that I'd done this and "You know Goddamned well you done that," and "You're just an ornery so and so." That went on from 9 o'clock til 3 o'clock the next morning. Well, at 3 o'clock that next morning, I admit that I was getting awful nervous. And I just had about half the sense that I ought to have. They took me in the courtroom or the judges room, and there was a table there. Said, "Sit on that table." Bonar. Bonar done this. So I sat up on that table and he took his gun off and it was loaded and everything 'cause I could see in it, you know, his holster. And he laid it on a chair right beside the table. Just took the belt buckle, doubled it around the gun, laid it on this chair. And outside he went. Well, I, I didn't fall for that, because I knew better than that. I knowed what he laid it down there for. I knowed what he was thinking. So I just laid down on the table like I went to sleep. But I couldn't have went to sleep at all. I'd been, never was missed, never was as abused as bad in my life.